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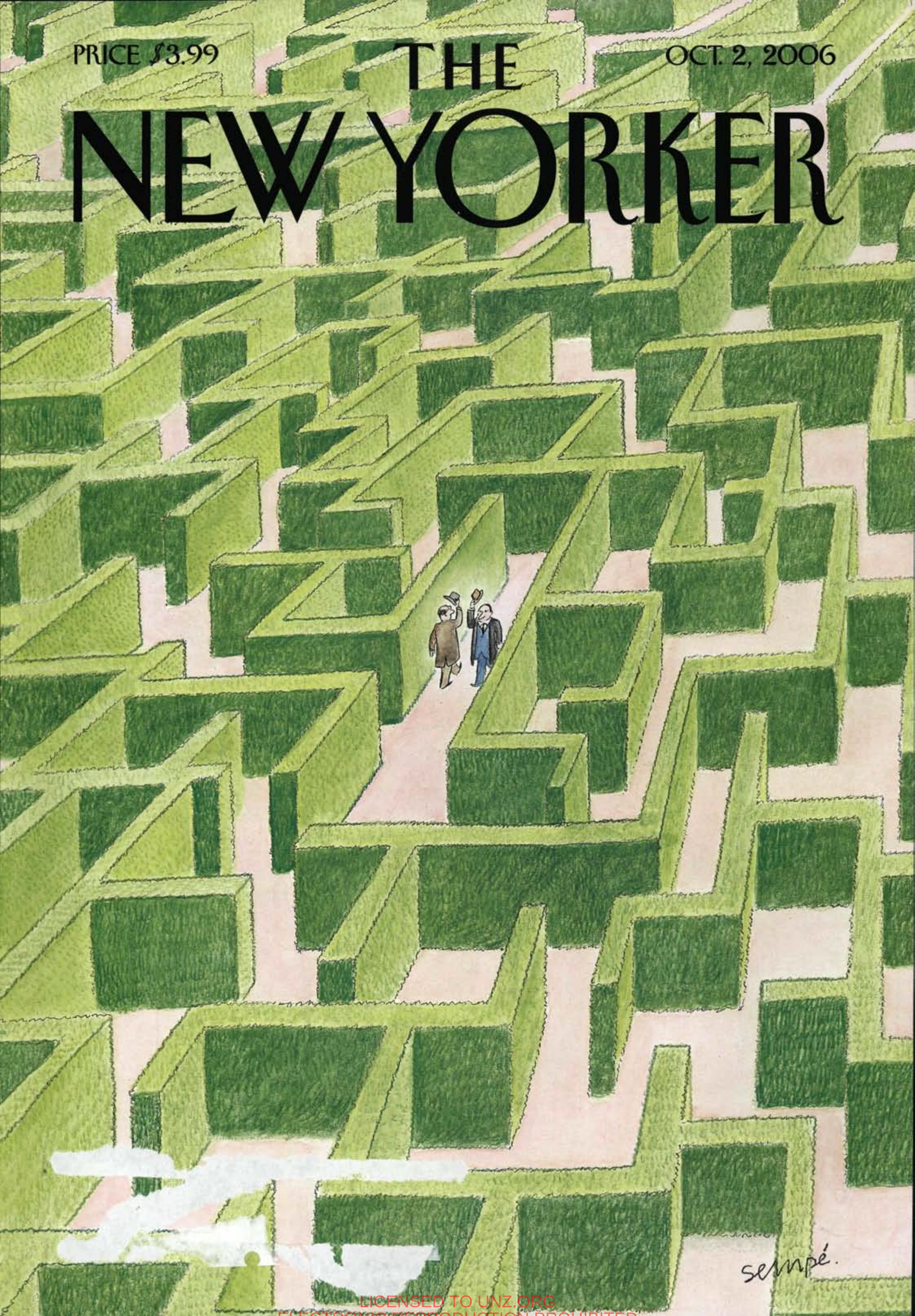
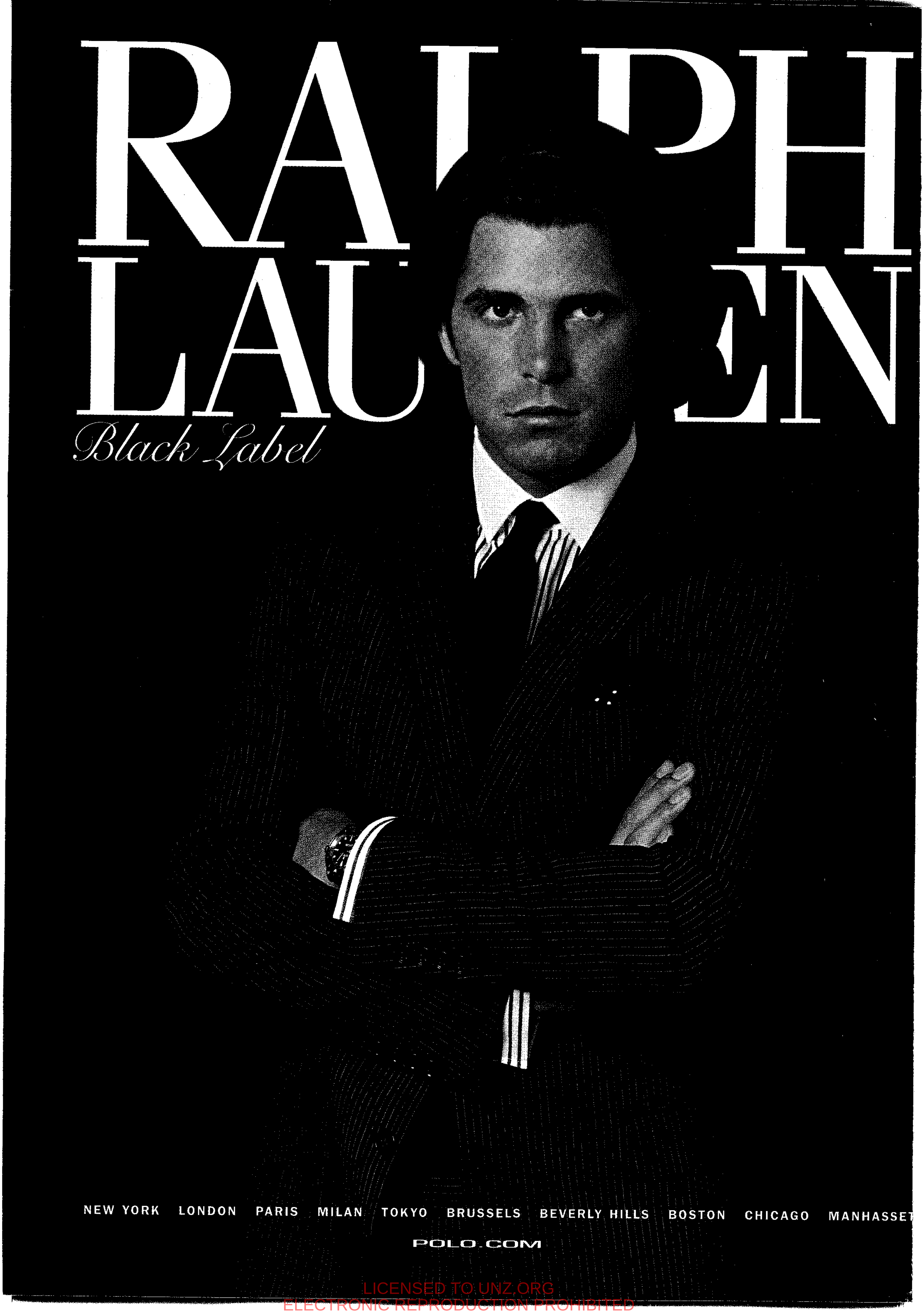
OCT. 2, 2006

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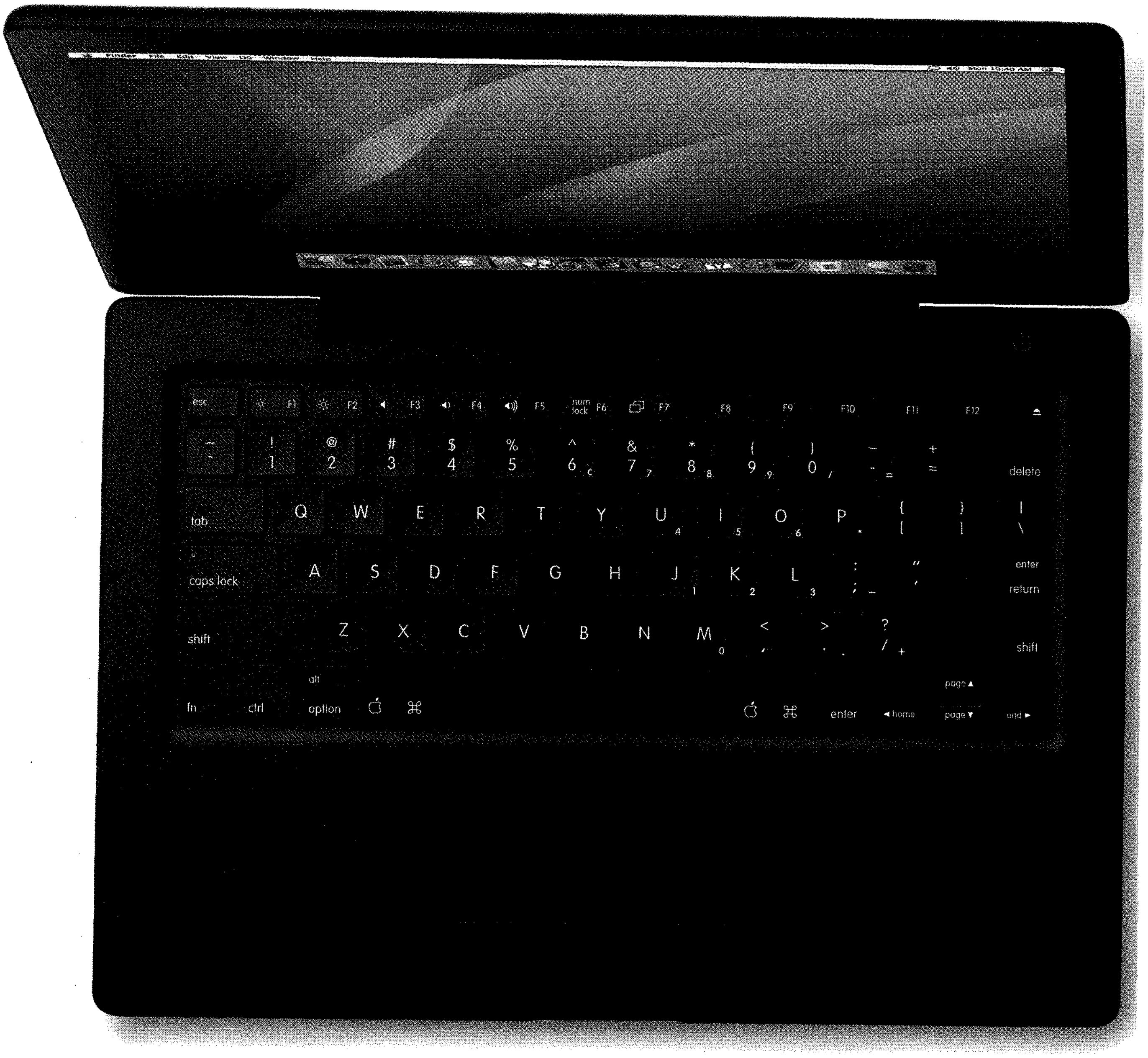

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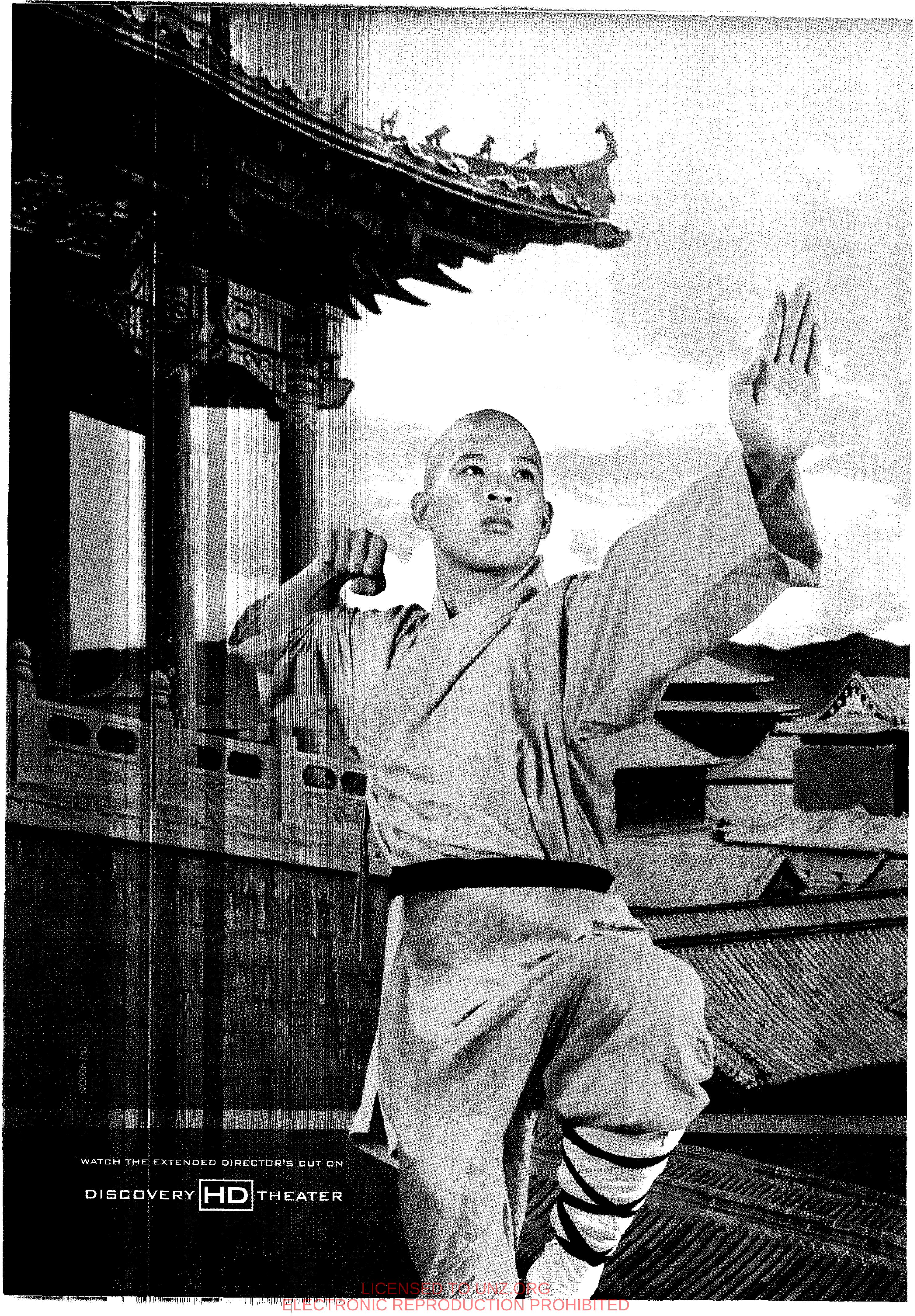
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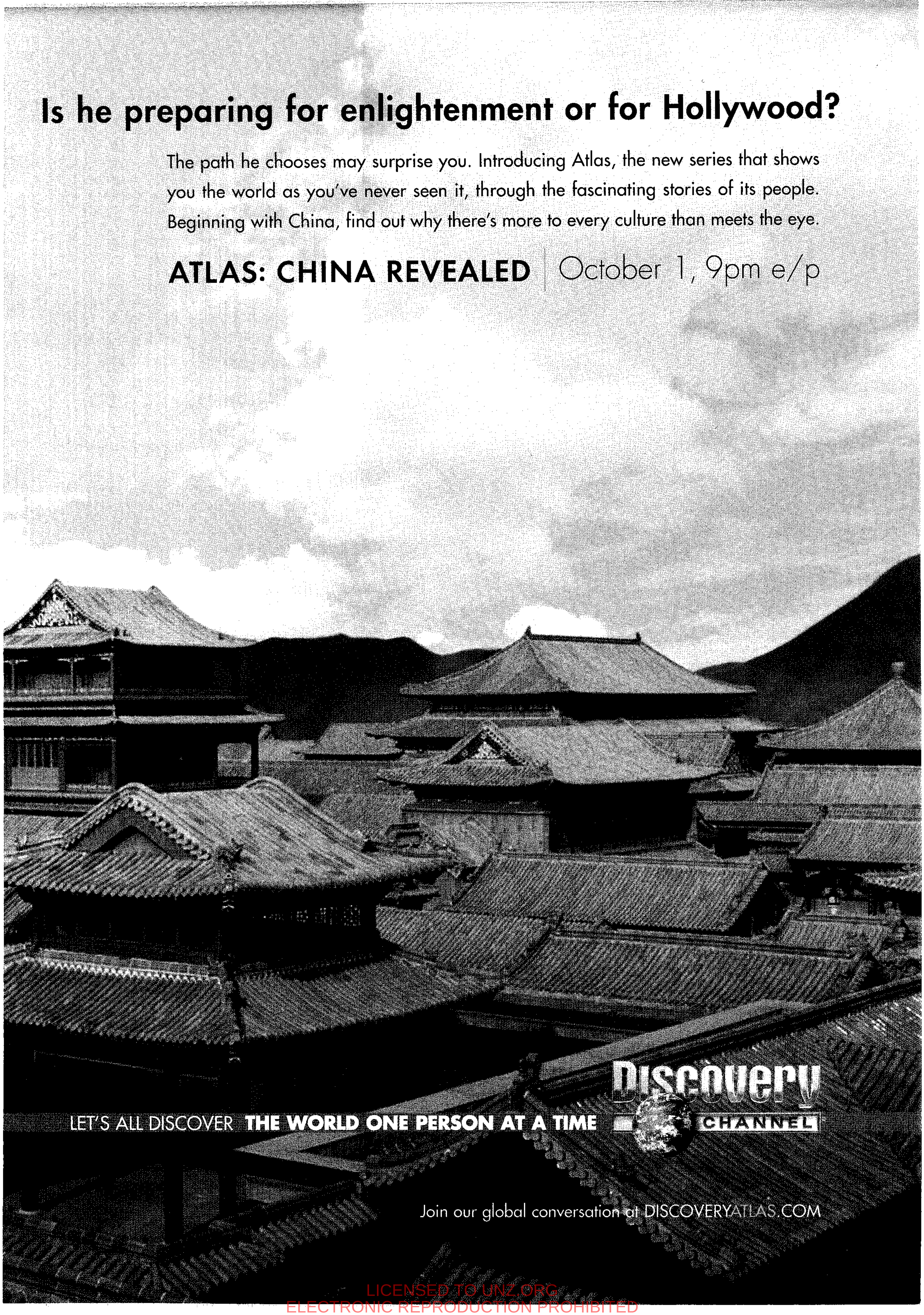

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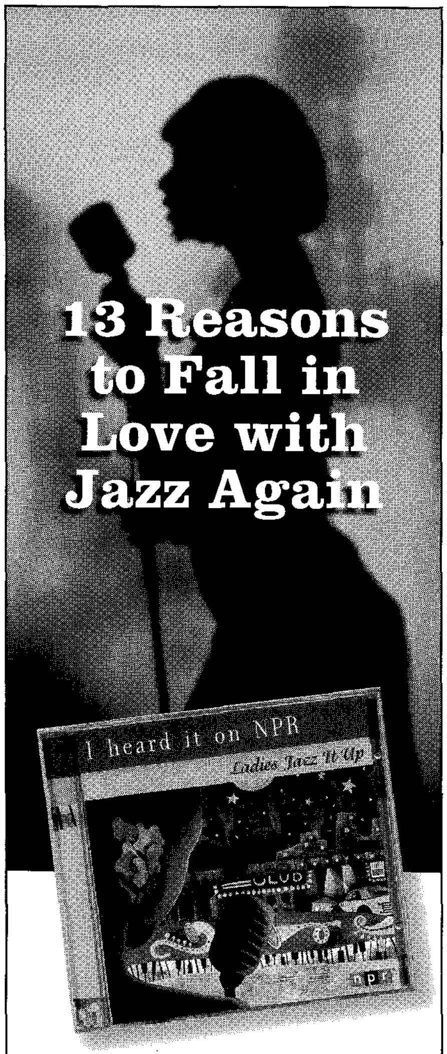
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THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 2, 2006

12 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
35 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Dorothy Wickenden on college admissions; dignitaries in town; a chic shoe thief.

Bill Buford 42 NOTES OF A GASTRONOME
TV Dinners
The unstoppable rise of cooking shows.
Woody Allen 48 CASUAL
Pinchuck's Law
Ben Bradlee 52 PERSONAL HISTORY
A Return
Memories of war in the South Pacific.
John Lahr 58 PROFILES
Command Performance
Helen Mirren's regal touch.
Burkhard Bilger 66 OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS
The Path of Stones
The gem rush in Madagascar.
Lore Segal 80 FICTION
"Other People's Deaths"

THE CRITICS
Jim Holt 86 A CRITIC AT LARGE
Two critiques of string theory.
BOOKS
91 Briefly Noted
Louis Menand 92 *Charles Frazier's "Thirteen Moons."*
Hilton Als 94 THE THEATRE
"Richard II," "The Pain and the Itch."
Sasha Frere-Jones 96 POP MUSIC
Ludacris's bawdy brilliance.
David Denby 99 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"All the King's Men," "The Last King of Scotland."

POEMS
Deborah Digges 73 "The Birthing"
D. Nurkse 82 "Three Naps on Swan's Island"

COVER *"Chance Encounter," by J. J. Sempé* DRAWINGS *Leo Cullum, Edward Koren, Harry Bliss, Julia Suits, C. Covert Darbyshire, Carolita Johnson, Robert Mankoff, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Michael Maslin, Mick Stevens, P. C. Vey, Jack Ziegler, Roz Chast, Barbara Smaller, Charles Barsotti* SPOTS *Tibor Karpati*

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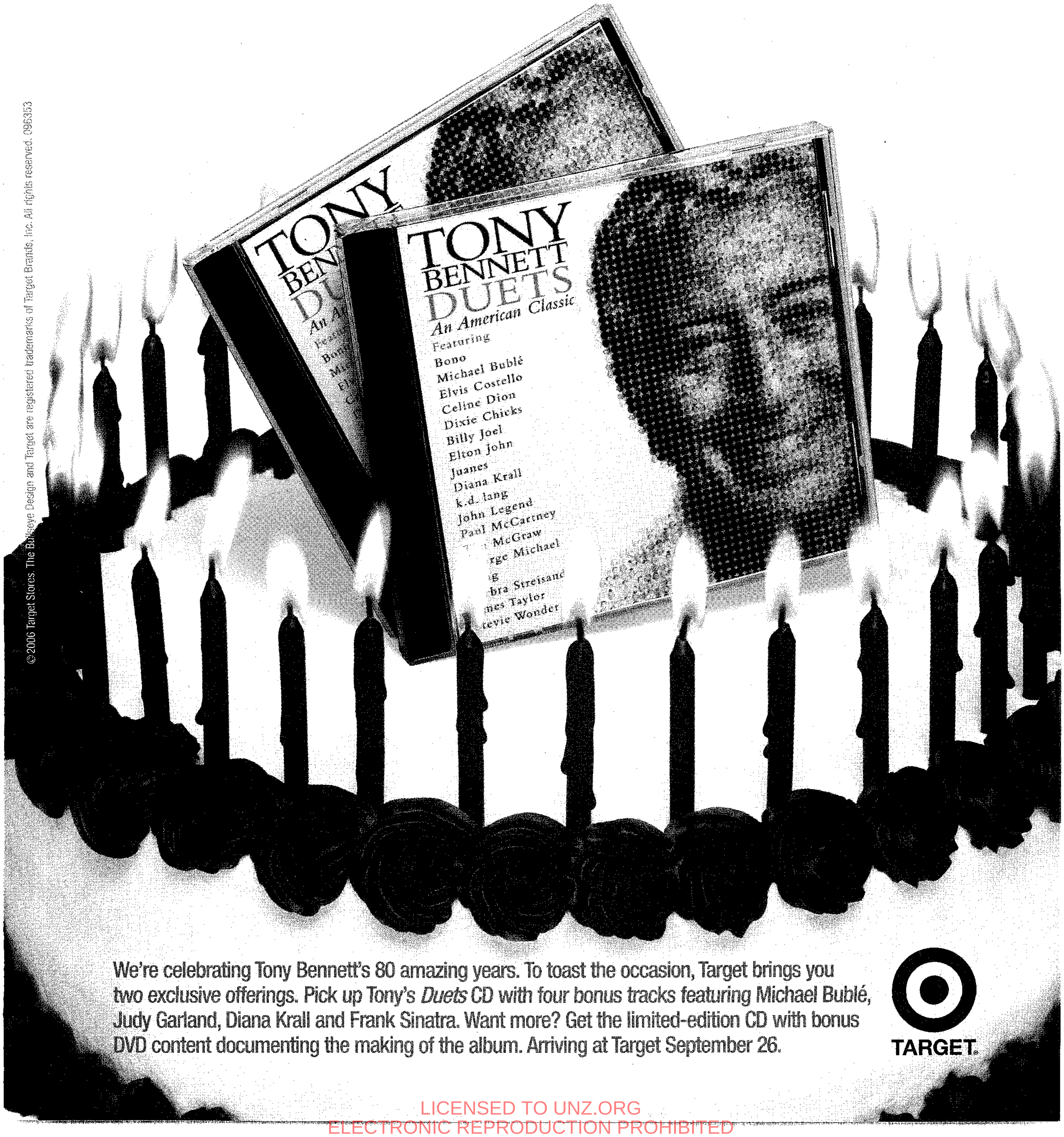
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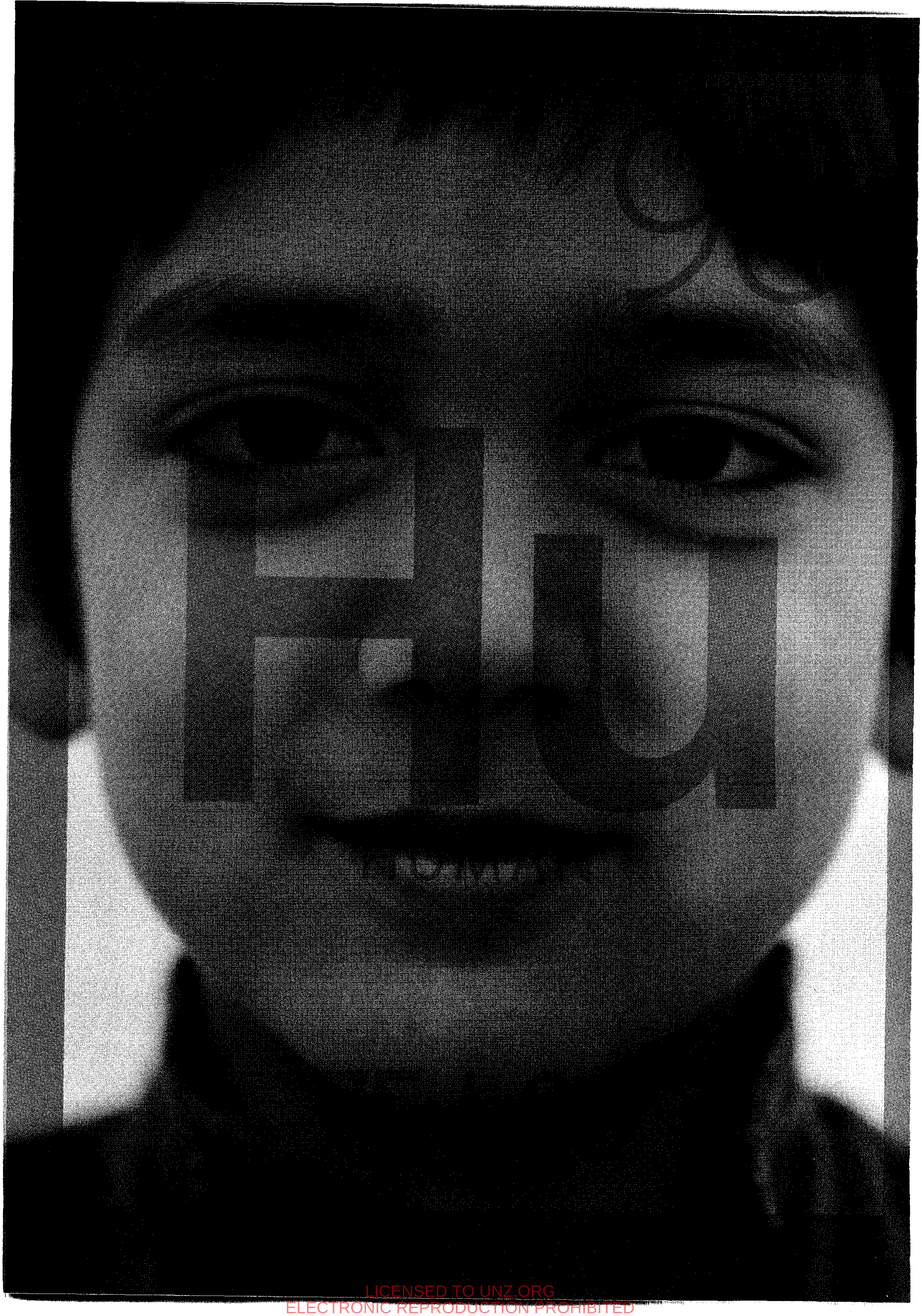
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CONTRIBUTORS

Bill Buford ("TV Dinners," p. 42) writes about food and drink for the magazine. "Heat," an amateur's adventures in restaurant kitchens, was published earlier this year.

Dorothy Wickenden (Comment, p. 35) is the executive editor of *The New Yorker.*

Woody Allen (Casual, p. 48) has been a contributor to the magazine for many years.

Ben Bradlee ("A Return," p. 52) was the executive editor of the Washington *Post* for twenty-three years. He is the author of "A Good Life."

J.J. Sempé (Cover) has four illustrated books, "Nothing Is Simple," "Everything Is Complicated," "Sunny Spells," and "Mixed Messages," and a graphic novel, "Monsieur Lambert," coming out next month.

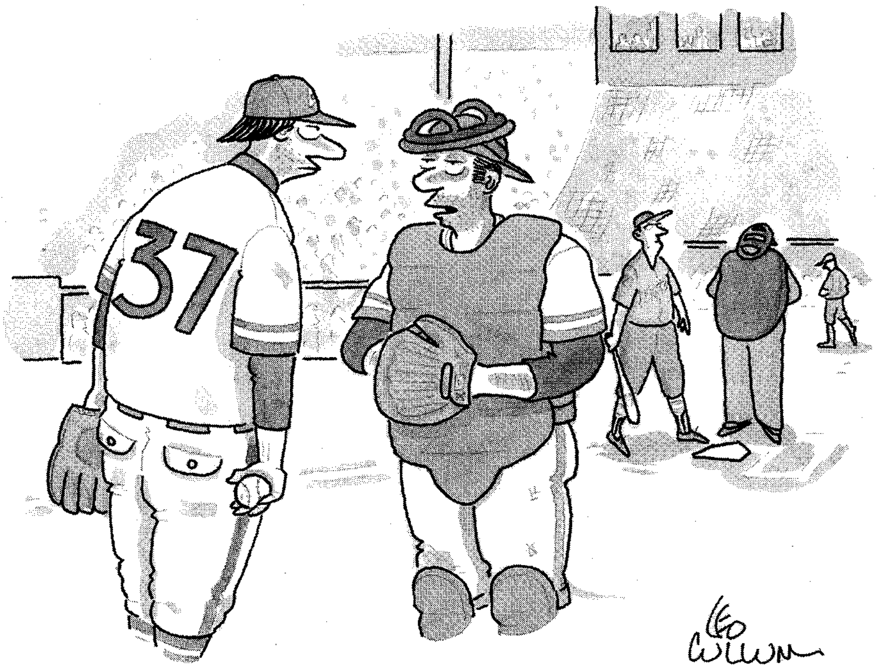
John Lahr ("Command Performance," p. 58) is the magazine's senior drama critic. His most recent book is "Honky Tonk Parade: *New Yorker* Profiles of Show People."

Burkhard Bilger ("The Path of Stones," p. 66) is a staff writer and the author of "Noodling for Flatheads."

Lore Segal (Fiction, p. 80) is a novelist, essayist, and translator. Her book "Shakespeare's Kitchen," a collection of related stories, several of which first appeared here, will be published in the spring.

Jim Holt (A Critic at Large, p. 86) has been contributing to the magazine since 1995.

D. Nurkse (Poem, p. 82) has published eight collections of poems, including "The Fall" and "Burnt Island," which is available in paperback. ♦



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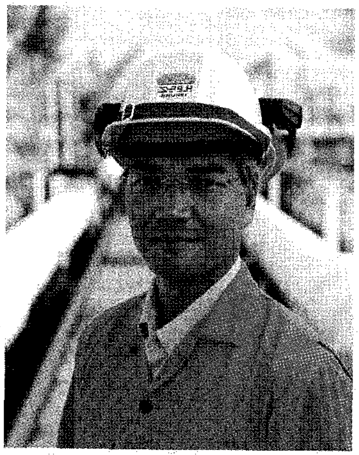

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GENERATION GAPS

In analyzing the impact of demographic conditions on pension schemes, Malcolm Gladwell implies that the wealth of nations and corporations is determined by the iron laws of demographics ("The Risk Pool," August 28th). It is true that anticipating demographic changes—such as shifts in birth rates, death rates, and the age of retirement—is essential to pension-fund planning. And it is expensive to provide for an aging population, especially when health-care costs are rising. But that is why we have actuaries; that is why insurance and pension schemes, when properly regulated and operated, accumulate reserves to meet future spending needs.

Bethlehem Steel, Pan Am, General Motors, and other companies could in principle have fully funded their pension and health-care promises. Big business failed in this not because of the overwhelming force of demographic determinism but because it opted to shift its responsibilities to the tax-paying public. When businesses neglect to use current earnings to adequately fund their pension and health-care promises, they are simply taking their loot today and leaving tomorrow's predictable problems for others to work out. The success of Ireland, the failure of Nigeria, and the bankruptcy of Bethlehem Steel may all owe something to demographics, but let us place fault where it belongs, and that is not in the stars.

Bernard Wasow
Senior Fellow
The Century Foundation
Washington, D.C.

Gladwell explains clearly the dependency ratio and the effects of demographic changes, but his advocacy of government or industry-wide social-insurance programs to manage retirement benefits and health-care coverage fails to address an important issue. In the United States, our Social Security system is supported by a vast contributing base. Yet it suffers from the same problem as corporation plans. In 1945, 41.9 workers were paying Social Security taxes for every person receiving benefits. In 1955, the ratio was 8.6 workers paying taxes to one Social Security beneficiary. By 2005, just 3.3 workers were paying taxes for each person receiving Social Security benefits, a dependency ratio well within the danger zone that Gladwell identifies.

E. Ted Bunn
Business Technology Instructor
Wright State University, Lake Campus
Celina, Ohio

THE FEAR FACTOR

John Lahr makes painfully clear how anxiety can prey on stage actors and destroy performances ("Petrified," August 28th). But in some instances actors may actually benefit from being just nervous enough. The Yerkes-Dodson law, first identified by psychologists in 1908, suggests that for any given task there is an optimal level of arousal linked to good performance. For especially mundane or repetitive tasks, it follows that a higher level of arousal may enhance performance, while more challenging tasks will likely be compromised by increased stress. As Lahr relates, acting is an extremely demanding task, and it comes as no surprise that stage fright can literally cripple actors. Yet, as anyone who has seen a sluggish performance toward the end of a long-running theatrical production can attest, being able to continually muster some degree of anxiety may imbue actors' performances with the spark and energy that make live theatre so special.

Jonathan Adler
Chicago, Ill.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. They can also be faxed to 212-286-5047. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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1	2	3	27	28	29	30

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
HOUSE PARTY

Scenes depicted in a Hell house—an evangelical-Christian takeoff on haunted houses that has gained popularity over the past thirty years—might include homosexuals being tortured in Hell for their behavior on earth, teen-agers having gruesome abortions, and children being damned for reading the Harry Potter books. Les Freres Corbusier presents its version of the phenomenon, "Hell House," for a monthlong run at St. Ann's Warehouse. (See page 15.)

NIGHT LIFE
WHEN IN ROMANY

The New York Gypsy Festival, a two-week celebration of Romany music, returns for its second year, starting with an ebullient program of wedding songs and more by the trumpeter Costel Vasilescu, who hails from Bucharest and is making his first appearance in the United States. (See page 18.)

ART
STOCKPILED

The artist Jessica Stockholder performs small sculptural miracles with Wal-Mart–style plastic goods, scraps of fabric and paper, and scavenged bits of debris. Her exuberant new show is at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in Chelsea. (See page 22.)

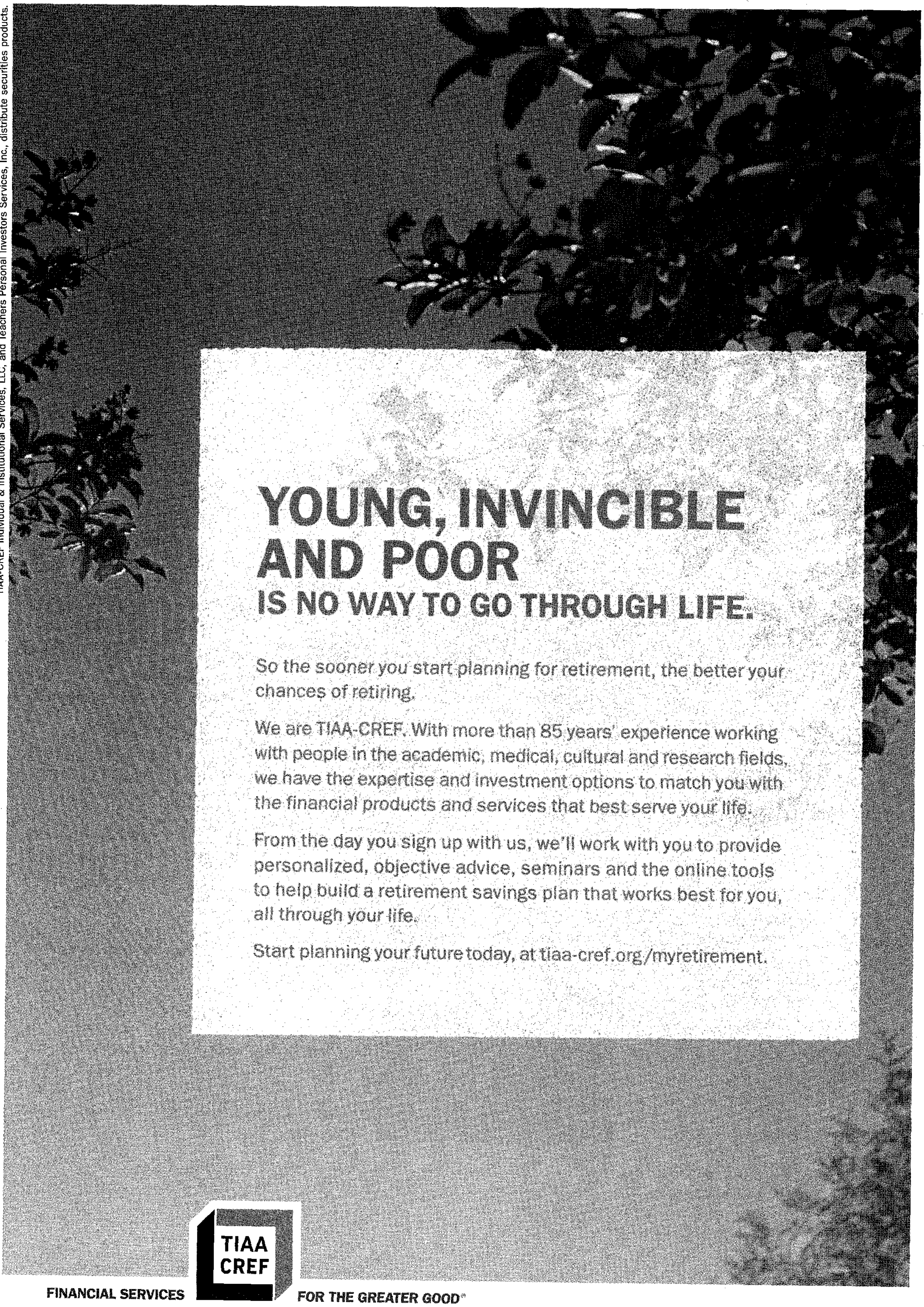
CLASSICAL MUSIC
FORCE MAJEURE

The pianism of Vladimir Feltsman—who became famous when he emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1987—is notable for its subtle mixture of brains and brawn. He leaves his usual Steinway behind to play a series of Mozart concerts on a lighter, more delicate fortepiano. (See page 27.)

MOVIES
BIG FILMS, BIG SCREEN

The New York Film Festival presents classic films from the Janus catalogue, projected from 35-mm. prints. The masterworks include Jean Renoir's "Rules of the Game," from 1939, which consigned naïve heroism and aristocratic detachment to history a year before the Second World War did, and "Monika," from 1953, in which Ingmar Bergman ushered in a new age of psychodramatic intimacy. (See page 31.)

Christie's will auction clothes and props from "Star Trek." Photograph by Lisa Kereszi.



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COLLEGE CAMPUSES COAST TO COAST

FALL CULTURAL CALENDAR

November

University of Chicago • Chicago

"Hotel Cassiopeia"

November 12th–December 10th (times vary) • courttheatre.org

"Hotel Cassiopeia" follows the collage artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) as he searches Manhattan for life's perfect moments to articulate in his art work. In this performance piece, Cornell's character overhears—and fabricates—conversations, finds inspiration from movies, and experiences the juxtapositions inherent in any American city: the energy and compassion found alongside longing and heartbreak.

Hunter College • New York

Twelfth Annual Avignon/New York Film Festival

November 15th–19th (times vary) • kayeplayhouse.hunter.cuny.edu

The Avignon/New York Film Festival showcases European and American independent features, documentaries, and short films through a Francophile filter. Like its sister celebration in France, this stateside counterpart presents screenings, interviews, panels, and wine tastings. This year's honoree: actor-director John Turturro.

University of Washington • Seattle

Noche Flamenca

November 16th–18th, 8 P.M. • uwworldseries.org

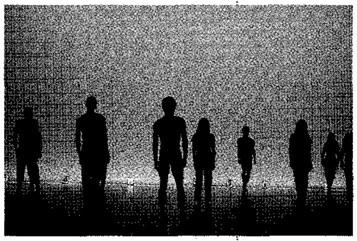
Founded in 1993 by artistic director Martin Santangelo and his wife, the dancer Soledad Barrio, Madrid's Noche Flamenca creates a communal spirit by giving equal weight to music, dance, and song. With their unbridled passion, Noche Flamenca performances exude *duende*—the inexpressible essence of this art form.

University of North Carolina • Chapel Hill

"Drought and Rain Vol. 2"

November 16th, 7:30 P.M.; November 17th, 8 P.M. • carolinaperformingarts.org

Employing dancers from the National Ballet of Vietnam and a traditional Vietnamese music ensemble in this U.S. premiere, choreographer Ea Sola revisits the Vietnam War in "Drought and Rain Vol. 2," which offers a postwar generation's reflections on the conflict.



The George Washington University • Washington, D.C.

Bill Frisell's Unspeakable Orchestra

November 17th, 8 P.M. • lisner.org

The standard-bearer of adventurous jazz guitar, Bill Frisell received a Grammy for his electronics-steeped album, "Unspeakable." Frisell's orchestra will join him in a sampled and looped set filled with twists, turns, and improvisational surprises.

December

Michigan State University • East Lansing

The London Philharmonic Orchestra with Kurt Masur, conductor; Sarah Chang, violin

December 1st, 8 P.M. • whartoncenter.com

Maestro Kurt Masur conducts the London Philharmonic Orchestra in Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica") and Sibelius's Violin Concerto in D Minor, featuring the gifted violinist Sarah Chang. An Avery Fisher Prize recipient, Chang has collaborated with such artists as Isaac Stern and Pinchas Zukerman.

University of California • Los Angeles

"The McGarrigle Christmas Hour"

December 6th, 8 P.M. • uclalive.org

The luscious harmonies and down-home instrumentation of French-Canadian sisters Kate and Anna McGarrigle's album, "The McGarrigle Christmas Hour," are already a part of the Christmas CD canon. From the frigid North Country, the McGarrigles bring their heartwarming show of traditional and original Yuletide tunes, joined by friends and family, including Kate's children, Martha and Rufus Wainwright.

University of California • Berkeley

Chekhov International Theatre Festival's "Twelfth Night"

December 7th–8th, 8 P.M.; December 9th, 2 P.M. & 8 P.M.; December 10th, 3 P.M. & 7 P.M. • calperfs.berkeley.edu

Theatre director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod join forces to serve up the Chekhov International Theatre Festival's irresistible take on the Bard's comedy "Twelfth Night"—with a Russian twist. The all-star, all-male cast from Russia's stage, cinema, and television delivers a powerful, physical, and hilarious production. Performed in Russian with English subtitles.

University of Pennsylvania • Philadelphia

Eileen Ivers, "An Nollaig—An Irish Christmas"

December 16th, 8 P.M. • pennpresents.org

With her repertoire rooted in Celtic music (and the strong influence of her multicultural Bronx upbringing), violin virtuoso Eileen Ivers presides as both a prominent exponent and a pioneer of Irish folk music. The nine-time all-Ireland fiddling champion and "Riverdance" star celebrates the season Irish-style, with festive traditional and original songs and dance.

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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ARMS AND THE MAN
At the Pearl, George Bernard Shaw's 1894 satire, about a young girl who romanticizes war. Previews begin Sept. 29. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

BIRTH AND AFTER BIRTH
Atlantic Theatre Company presents the New York première of Tina Howe's comedy, about overachieving parents trying to impress a childless anthropologist couple with their four-year-old's birthday party. In previews. Opens Oct. 3. (336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

BLUE DOOR
Leigh Silverman directs Tanya Barfield's drama, about a black mathematician who is visited by the ghosts of his ancestors. Previews begin Sept. 28. (Peter Jay Sharp, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

A CHORUS LINE
A revival of the 1975 musical conceived by Michael Bennett, about twenty-four aspirants for eight spots in the chorus of a Broadway show. With music by Marvin Hamlisch and lyrics by Edward Kleban. Bob Avian directs. In previews. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

DRUG BUDDY
Alex Kilgore directs David Folwell's drama, about the consequences of a young man's first experience with sex and drugs. In previews. Opens Sept. 30. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-868-4444.)

¡EL CONQUISTADOR!
The New York première of a play by Thaddeus Phillips, about a Colombian peasant who flees his war-torn village to become a soap-opera star. Tatiana Mallarino directs. In previews. Opens Oct. 3. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

EVIL DEAD THE MUSICAL
Hinton Battle and Christopher Bond direct this campy musical adaptation of Sam Raimi's horror-film franchise. Previews begin Oct. 2. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

GREY GARDENS
Christine Ebersole and Mary Louise Wilson star in Doug Wright's musical based on the 1975 Maysles-brothers documentary about Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter, Little Edie, the reclusive aunt and cousin, respectively, of Jackie Kennedy. Previews begin Oct. 3. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

HEARTBREAK HOUSE
Roundabout Theatre Company opens its season with George Bernard Shaw's romantic drama from 1920, set on an English country estate. Starring Philip Bosco, Swoosie Kurtz, Byron Jennings, Lily Rabe, and Laila Robins. In previews. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

HELL HOUSE
Les Freres Corbusier and a company of nearly a hundred present their version of the evangelical-Christian take on the haunted house, in which abortions, homosexuality, and other sins alleged to damn one to Hell are enacted. Previews begin Oct. 1. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St. 718-254-8779.)

JAY JOHNSON: THE TWO AND ONLY
The veteran ventriloquist and ex-"Soap" star Johnson portrays an array of characters, from monkey to tennis ball, in this production, which originated at the Atlantic Theatre Company. In previews. Opens Sept. 28. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

LOSING LOUIE
Matthew Arkin and Scott Cohen star in the U.S. première of Simon Mendes da Costa's comedy, a portrait of two generations, fifty years apart. Jerry Zaks directs. In previews. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

NIXON'S NIXON
MCC Theatre presents Russell Lees's play, which imagines a conversation between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger the night Nixon resigned from the Presidency. Directed by Jim Simpson. In previews. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE
Cynthia Nixon stars as an outspoken teacher in a Scottish girls' school in the nineteen-thirties, in this play adapted from the Muriel Spark novel, pro-

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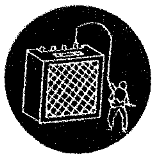


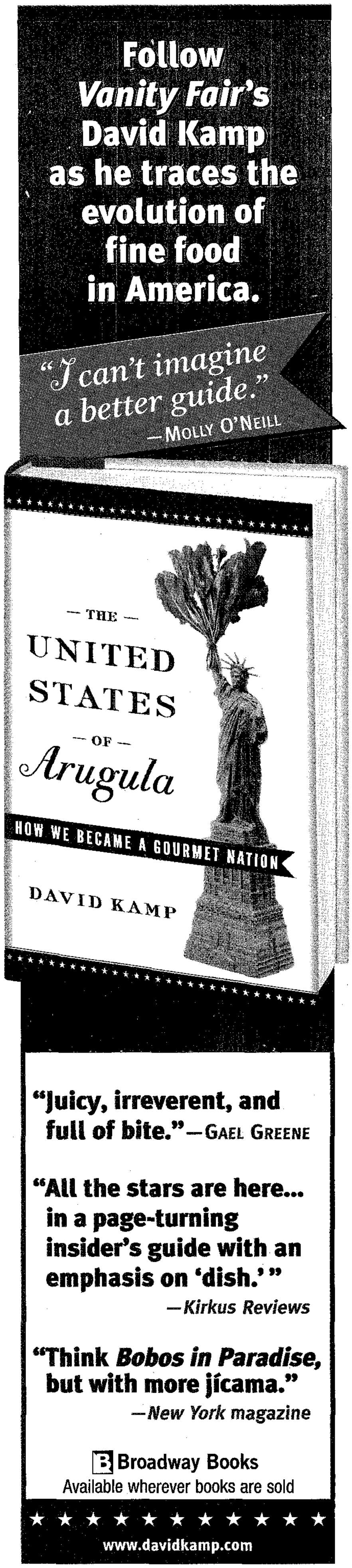
POP NOTES
MASTER KILLER

Behavioral specialists will tell you that assertiveness involves protecting your own space, while aggressiveness involves taking over someone else's. Jerry Lee Lewis is an object lesson in the difference. His new record, **"Last Man Standing"** (Artists First), is, in theory, a duets album of rock-and-roll, blues, and country standards performed with twenty-two big-name guests; Keith Richards, John Fogerty, Neil Young, Rod Stewart, B. B. King, Little Richard, Willie Nelson, and Eric Clapton all showed up. It's a long list, and, luckily, you don't have to remember them all. You just have to remember Jerry Lee.

A wise man once said, "There's only ever been four stylists in popular music—Al Jolson, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Jerry Lee Lewis." That wise man was Jerry Lee himself, who reiterates his point from the first notes of "Last Man Standing." Listen to the way that he hijacks Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll" (with Jimmy Page on guitar) and Bruce Springsteen's "Pink Cadillac" (with Springsteen on vocals). Lewis has a kind of Midas touch that turns everything he plays into piano-pumping rock; both songs end up sounding like they've been unearthed from the Sun Records vaults. And while there are poignant covers of Mick Jagger's "Evening Gown" and Kris Kristofferson's "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33" and topnotch country pairings with Merle Haggard and George Jones, more representative is a blitzkrieg takeover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Travelin' Band," in which Lewis roars through the double-time verses with amphetamine fury. The only major misstep is a poorly arranged version of "Honky Tonk Women" with Kid Rock. Why not give Jerry Lee a shot at "Bawitdaba"?

Lewis is seventy-one this week, but as albums by aging legends go, "Last Man Standing" is quite a different proposition from the valedictory records that Johnny Cash made with Rick Rubin. Cash was vulnerable, introspective, affectingly morbid; he was sitting in the library looking through old photographs. Jerry Lee is out on the porch with a rifle across his lap. It's not at all clear that "Last Man Standing" is an album about death; on the strength of this evidence, it's possible to imagine that Jerry Lee will never die, and that he'll keep on making diabolical, salacious rock and roll until time has claimed the rest of the human race and turned the earth into a great ball of fire. Insert red-hot right-hand piano run here.

—*Ben Greenman*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duced by the New Group. Scott Elliott directs. In previews. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

SOUTHERN COMFORTS
Primary Stages presents this drama, in which a widow and a widower fall in love during the golden years of their lives. In previews. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

SUBURBIA
Second Stage Theatre begins its season with an updated version of Eric Bogosian's 1994 study of teen angst and racial tension, starring Daniel Eric Gold, Jessica Capshaw, and Kieran Culkin. Jo Bonney directs. In previews. Opens Sept. 28. (307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'
Twyla Tharp conceived, directed, and choreographed this jukebox musical set to the music of Bob Dylan. In previews. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

WRECKS
Ed Harris stars in the U.S. première of Neil LaBute's latest play, about a Midwestern man who has just lost his wife, in a production that first appeared in Cork, Ireland. Directed by LaBute. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

NOW PLAYING

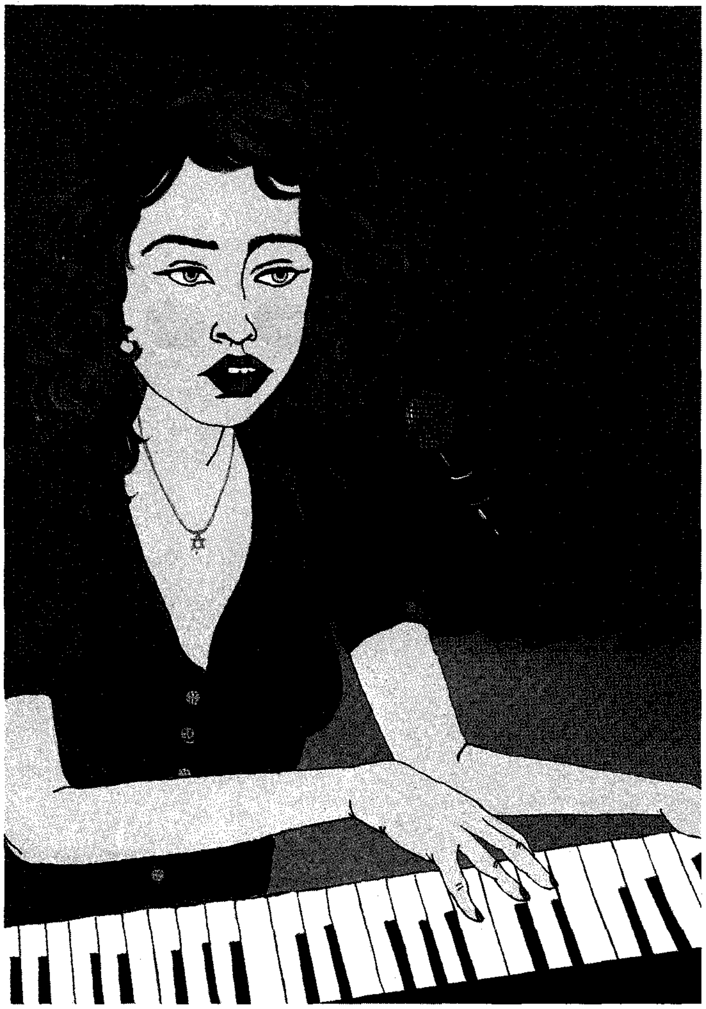
ASYLUM: THE STRANGE CASE OF MARY LINCOLN
June Bingham wrote the book and Carmel Owen wrote the music and lyrics for this musical, set in 1875, during Mary Todd Lincoln's stay at an asylum. The sisterly relationship between Mrs. Lincoln (the fine Carolann Page) and a black nurse named Delia is the emotional center of the play, but there is something rotten in this depiction of yet another understanding, strong black woman. Her songs and speeches are a giant cliché, one that's meant to congratulate the liberal mind-set of audiences who recognize Delia as goodness incarnate. (Reviewed in our issue of 9/25/06.) (York, 619 Lexington Ave. 212-868-4444. Through Oct. 1.)

ESOTERICA
In his new show, the magician Eric Walton adopts the persona of a brainiac and "part-time shaman," tossing references to etymology, abstract mathematics, and minor Roman poets into his act. During one extended feat, he even stops to share historical tidbits about various of the fifty states, chosen at random by audience members. But, in the end, the show is weighed down by a lacklustre choice of illusions (for all his schooling in the arcane, Walton does an awful lot of card tricks), and Walton's take on a classic chess brainteaser called the Knight's Tour and on an old con game called Fast and Loose are lifted from Ricky Jay's more sophisticated act from 2002. Walton lacks both Jay's facility with cards and his magnetism. (DR2, 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

FIZZ
Roberto Goizueta (Bryant Mason), the man behind the New Coke debacle of the mid-eighties, was a Cuban immigrant turned C.E.O. who thought he could beat Pepsi by changing the taste of Coca-Cola. Instead, he got hate mail from an enraged public. In Rogelio Martinez's flavorful new comedy, directed by Sam Gold, Goizueta's bad judgment is depicted as a problem of assimilation; he was savvy about taste-test data but blind to the American Zeitgeist. Despite this thoughtful thesis, the play is full of tomfoolery: dance breaks, dream sequences, a visit from beyond the grave. A more sober play could certainly be written about Goizueta, but Martinez has crafted an engagingly nutty one. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-279-4200. Through Sept. 30.)

JOHN FERGUSON
Mint Theatre Company revives St. John Ervine's play from 1919, about an Irish farmer who needs a miracle. Martin Platt directs. (311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231.)

MACHIAVELLI
Evan Bergman directs Richard Vetere's comic play about the Florentine Renaissance philosopher. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 212-239-6200.)



The pianist and singer Regina Spektor plays Town Hall this week.

MORGAN ELLIOTT

'NAMI
Partial Comfort Productions presents a drama by Chad Beckim, about two neighboring couples—one white and one black and Latino—who get mixed up in illegal child trafficking and end up harboring an orphaned girl from Indonesia. For both of the wives (Eva Kaminsky and Quincy Tyler Bernstine), the girl becomes an outlet for misplaced maternal instinct, but their compassion comes at the price of their own safety. While Beckim's opening scenes are patiently plotted, the second act devolves into needlessly harrowing melodrama (fingers are cut off, people lose their minds). However, several of the performances, particularly Bernstine's, lend the production a soulfulness that the script lacks. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Sept. 30.)

THE PAIN AND THE ITCH
Playwrights Horizons opens its season with a new comedy by Bruce Norris. (Reviewed in this issue.) (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

RICHARD II
Michael Cumpsty stars in Classic Stage Company's presentation of Shakespeare's drama. (Reviewed in this issue.) (136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

SONGS OF THE DRAGONS FLYING TO HEAVEN
The première of Young Jean Lee's comic look at her Korean-American identity, presented by HERE Arts Center. (145 Sixth Ave. 212-352-3101.)

THEOPHILUS NORTH
Matthew Burnett's gentle adaptation of Thornton Wilder's semiautobiographical novel has the aw-shucks wholesomeness of a Jimmy Stewart movie. When his car breaks down in posh nineteen-twenties Newport, young Theophilus (Giorgio Litt), an uptight little Yale man with lofty ideas, reluctantly goes to work for the town's élite. He tutors their children and solves their personal crises with surprising alacrity—until, growing restless and writerly, he pushes on. The Keen Company's Carl Forsman smoothly directs the traffic, whisking the two dozen characters (played by a solid cast of seven) around the stage and filling out the bare-bones set with rich, ambient sound. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE TREATMENT
In Eve Ensler's new play, Man (Dylan McDermott), a war veteran, and Woman (Portia), a military psychiatrist, face off in a series of short scenes. Man is a walking trauma, bruised by the indescribable destruction and the random use of force he has witnessed and taken part in, and he cannot resist Woman's interest in finding out who he is, even as he makes her stand for something other than herself. Despite the play's sometimes confused ideology, McDermott and Portia bring humanity to their roles. The show's able director, Leigh Silverman, doesn't ignore Ensler's self-evident message—that war destroys us in ways that we cannot name—but neither does she let it stand in the way of the characters, who interest her, and occasionally us, with their morbid, earnest dance of death. (9/25/06) (45 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100.)

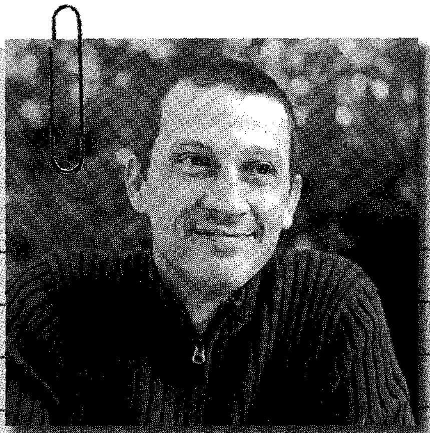
Also Playing

ABSINTHE: Pier 17, South Street Seaport. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 1. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE COLOR PURPLE:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200. **THE DROWSY CHAPERONE:** Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-307-4100. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **THE HISTORY BOYS:** Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. Through Oct. 1. **IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING:** Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **NO CHILD . . . :** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **SEVEN GUITARS:** Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. **[TITLE OF SHOW]:** Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 1. **THE WEDDING SINGER:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Sept. 28: The young Nashville punk band **Be Your Own Pet.** Sept. 29: The fresh and timeless power pop of the **Long Winters.** The songwriter John Roderick, who grew up in Anchorage, Alaska, leads



Dear Genentech,

There are three things that no one wants to hear: you have cancer, it's malignant, and it's fatal. I heard all three. Immediately, my thoughts were not of my life, but of my wife and four young kids. Thankfully, my doctor put me on a Genentech therapy and my cancer went into remission. I cannot express my gratitude enough. To honor my new lease on life I competed in a triathlon. That's right, a triathlon. And not too long ago I was just hoping to live. Thank you, Genentech. You saved my life.

Sincerely,

Michael Picarella
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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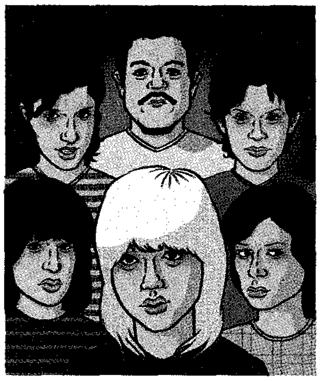
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
BRINGING SEXY BACK

It is usually lazy thinking, if not borderline offensive, to say things like "Gee, you don't sound Brazilian." And in a cyber market where Tokyo kids can download the music of a Dallas punk-rock band, this distinction may be meaningless. What sounds Brazilian, exactly? But when you encounter the brash and goofy São Paulo rock band CSS you will have a hard time not saying, "They're Brazilian?" If that is simply a way of noting that CSS are loud, sing in English, and are not acoustic musicians rooted in the soft rhythms of samba, then fine. CSS (Cansei de Ser Sexy, a Portuguese translation of "tired of being sexy," a remark they attribute to Beyoncé) is composed of one man and five women who celebrate pop culture in primitive disco songs about Paris Hilton and indie-rock groups that will likely disappear long before CSS does. Objects, including clothes, fly at CSS shows; recently, the singer Lovefoxxx lost a favorite dress and has requested its return. If you have it, bring it to one of their Webster Hall appearances, on Sept. 27 and Sept. 28.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*



MICHAEL WELDON

this band, which has included, at various times, esteemed members of the current Seattle rock scene. Sept. 30-Oct. 1: The indie singer-songwriter John Darnielle, who records as the **Mountain Goats.**

CBGB & OMFUG
315 Bowery, at Bleecker St. (212-982-4052)—After a long and storied history, the club is closing next month. Sept. 28: In the late eighties and early nineties, **Fishbone** crossed over from cult act to alternative success with a combination of hiccupy ska beats, funk, punk, metal, and soul. Its moment may have passed, but the band's live shows remain frenetic spectacles. ♦ Next door, at CB's Gallery, starting at 3 on Sept. 30, the **Hungry March Band** says farewell with an early set, followed by a slew of performance artists, burlesque acts, and other musicians. The band will also play a late-night set.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Sept. 27: The Australian band **Jet** emerged three years ago during the height of the garage-punk revival. With an endearingly grubby image and a sharp-cut single, "Are You Gonna Be My Girl," Jet saw its début album, "Get Born," land near the top of the charts. They are back with a new release, "Shine On." Sept. 30: The shimmering pop of **Mates of State,** a husband-and-wife organ-and-drum duo from San Francisco. Oct. 1: The hard-rocking locals in the **Hold Steady** are touring in support of their new album, "Boys and Girls in America." Oct. 2-3: The Texan neo-prog-rockers **Secret Machines** are known for epic-length songs that mix the cinematic scope of Pink Floyd with the stentorian wallop of Led Zeppelin. On their sophomore disk, "Ten Silver Drops," they've pared down their sonic sprawl into accessible portions for a pop-inclined audience.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Sept. 30: **Christina Courtin's Running Kicks.** Courtin's sultry voice, soulful lyrics, and original compositions, which combine hues of folk, blues, soul, and jazz, have earned this performer a devoted following, and she's all of twenty-three, fresh from studying classical violin at Juilliard. Her sound is often compared to Björk's and to Janis Joplin's. An EP is imminent, and it's only a matter of time before her group is snatched up by a label. Oct. 2: **Vlada Tomova's Balkan Tales.** This Bulgarian-born vocalist and composer, a founder of New York's Bulgarian women's choir, Yasna Voices, is known for her work with Balkan Beat Box, the electronic world-music ensemble created by Ori Kaplan and Tamir Muskat. Like B.B.B., Tomova delves into Balkan, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern music, though she foregoes brass-band and electronic elements in favor of an acoustic lineup. Part of the New York Gypsy Festival.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—Sept. 27: **NoMeansNo** is an enigmatic Canadian band that plays furiously complex punk with the finesse and agility of finely honed jazz musicians. Their dizzyingly uncompromising music is outdone only by their skewed sense of humor.

NEW YORK GYPSY FESTIVAL
The second annual festival gets under way in earnest on Sept. 29 with wedding songs, dance tunes, and ballads by the trumpeter **Costel Vasilescu** and his *taraf*, or band, of Romany musicians on double bass, accordion, cimbalom, violin, guitar, clarinet, and vocals. New York's own **Slavic Soul Party!** warms up the crowd. (Skirball Center, New York University, 566 LaGuardia Pl., at Washington Sq. S.) (See also Dance and Joe's Pub. Through Oct. 8. For more information, call 212-545-7536, or visit www.nygypsyfest.com.)

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—Sept. 28: **NoMeansNo** (see the Knitting Factory). Sept. 29: The **Youngblood Brass Band,** an expansive ensemble from Madison, Wisconsin, is the heartland's answer to the Roots: a horn-driven hip-hop group. Oct. 1: The earnest and anthemic young Chicago four-piece **Wax on Radio** is touring with the adventurous trio the **North Atlantic,** out of San Diego.

TOWN HALL
123 W. 43rd St. (212-840-2824)—Sept. 27-28: **Regina Spektor** performs songs from her engaging second album, "Begin to Hope." The young pianist and singer was born in Moscow, but she grew up in the Bronx and made her name on the local anti-folk scene. She has a pungent and captivating take on the singer-songwriter genre.

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Sept. 27-28: The au-courant synth pop of **Ladytron.** With the Brazilian group **CSS.**

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Sept. 26-Oct. 14: The vocalists **Allan Harris** and **KT Sullivan** salute Duke Ellington and Johnny Mercer. Piano support comes from **Eric Reed.**

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Sept. 26-30: **John Pizzarelli** and the **Swing 7.** The guitarist and singer Pizzarelli, as skilled a musician as he is an appealing entertainer, beefs up his sleek trio with a horn section for this engagement.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—Through Nov. 4: The Broadway veteran **Elaine Stritch,** who lives upstairs at this grand hotel, brings old-school insight and not a little grit to her ardent interpretations.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Sept. 27-Oct. 1: **Karrin Allyson,** an engaging singer with a deserved reputation, and **Nancy King,** a West Coast vocalist who warrants a higher profile, are backed by the pianist **Bruce Barth** and his trio.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—When you've shared the screen with the Marx Brothers, been chummy with Irving Berlin, and tied the knot with Moss Hart, you more than deserve the spotlight. **Kitty Carlisle Hart,** who just turned ninety-six and can still sing and kick up some sassy steps, is here Sept. 26-30, for a few nights of song, accompanied by treasured memories and insider show-biz tales.

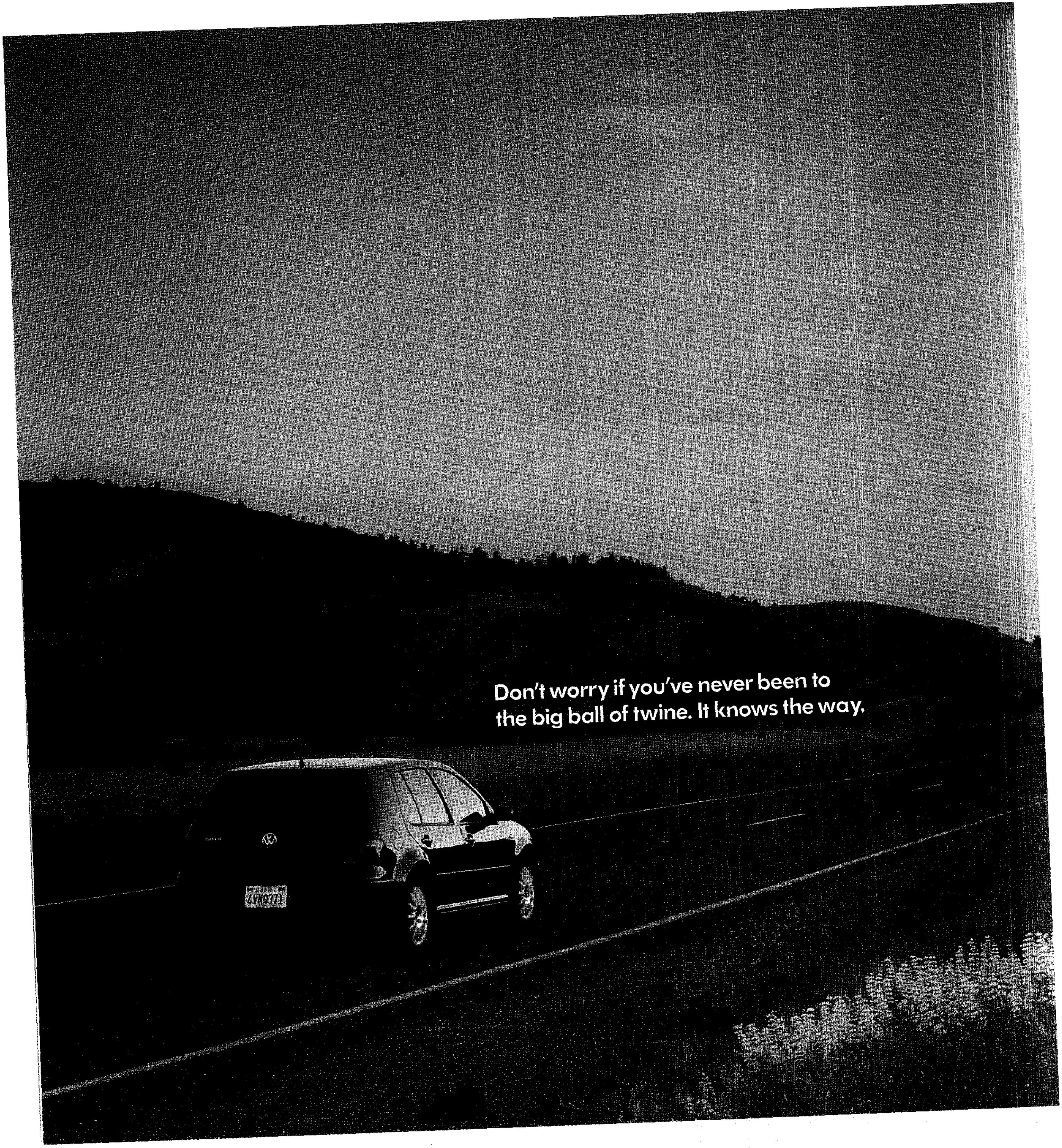
JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—Sept. 28-30: **Wynton Marsalis** rightfully reveres Louis Armstrong. He, along with the trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon,** the New Orleans banjo player **Don Vappie,** and others, pay direct tribute to the Master with performances of Armstrong's epochal Hot Fives and Sevens recordings.

JAZZ GALLERY
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—Sept. 28-30: The drummer **Jeff (Tain) Watts,** the saxophonist **Marcus Strickland,** the pianist **Lawrence Fields,** and others honor the late pianist Kenny Kirkland, who played with both Wynton and Branford Marsalis. Kirkland would have turned fifty-one this week.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Sept. 25: The guitarist **Juan-Carlos Formell.** Sept. 28-Oct. 1: The **Danilo Pérez** trio. Anyone who's heard Wayne Shorter's stunning group knows how quick-witted the pianist Pérez is. With his own trio, the Panamanian transplant explores his Latin roots.

ROULETTE
20 Greene St., between Canal and Grand Sts. (212-219-8242)—The composer, improviser, and sound artist **Miguel Frasconi,** here for a solo show on Oct. 1, is a bit of a Marco Polo, though the sonic territories he explores are wholly imaginary. He uses glass objects, electronics, keyboards, and what he calls "devolved" instruments to create otherworldly soundscapes, often influenced by, though not derivative of, other cultures.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Sept. 26-Oct. 1: The **Clark Terry** quintet. Age and infirmity can't stop Terry, the master brassman and artful singer of swinging gibberish who turns eighty-six this year. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.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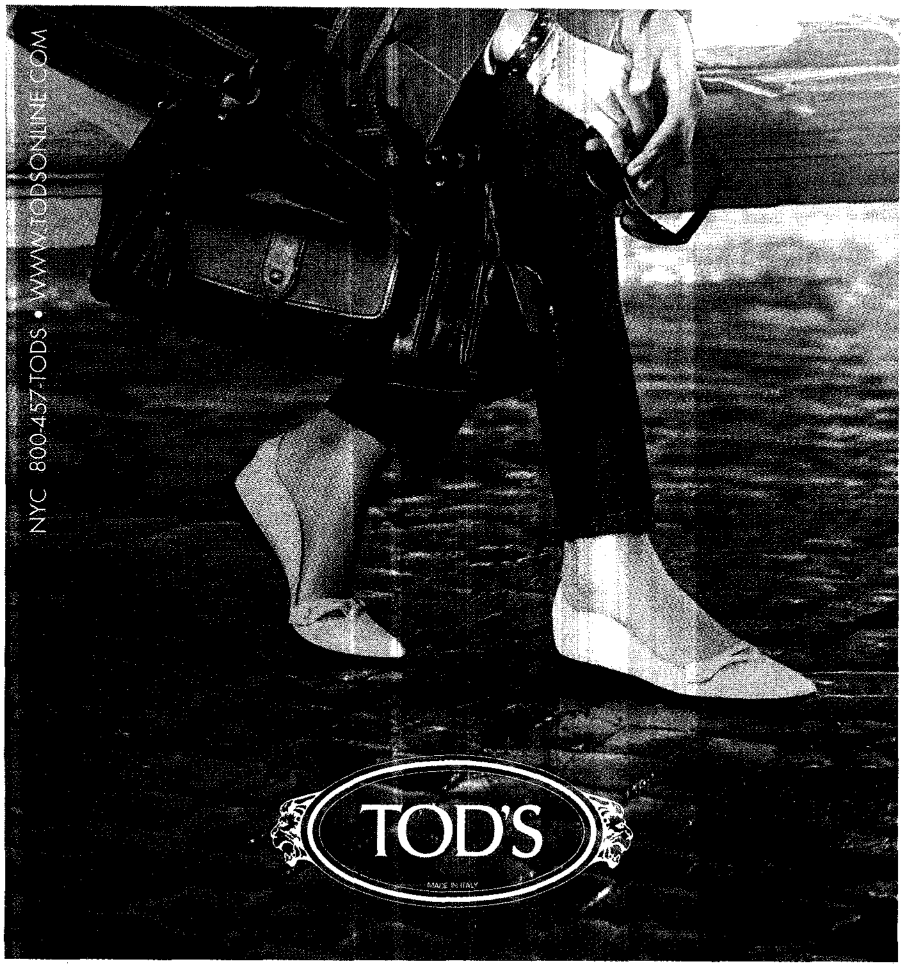
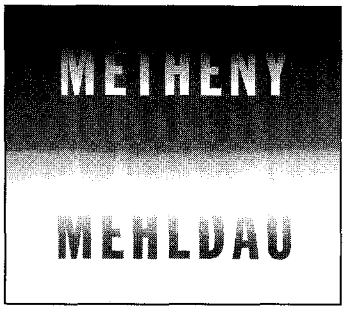


Words on Music

Borders music expert Jessica Sendra says:
"Piano and guitar duets are a rare thing, and this collaboration should set the standard for the contemporary era. Metheny and Mehldau are exceptionally well-suited to one another in temperament, and the ease that they bring to sophisticated writing is something to savor."



"Pat raised the stakes in terms of the expressive possibility and emotional fulfillment a listener can receive from jazz. Gratifying events like this do not come along very often." *– Brad Mehldau*

"Some of the most intensely creative and satisfying days I have ever had as a musician. It seemed like we had always played together." *– Pat Metheny*

These two artists, born almost a generation apart, have forged a partnership based on shared inspiration, as well as long-term mutual admiration. This first-time outing together also features tracks with Mehldau bandmates Larry Grenadier on bass and Jeff Ballard on drums. In all, it's an extraordinary collaboration: intuitive, natural, and utterly absorbing.

BORDERS.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde."** Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"New Orleans After the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori."** Through Dec. 10. ♦ **"Cai Guo-Qiang on the Roof: Transparent Monument."** Through Oct. 29. ♦ **"Rembrandt and His Circle: Drawings and Prints."** Through Oct. 15. ♦ **"Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Sculpture."** More than eighty portrait heads in gilded silver, marble, limestone, and painted wood. Opens Sept. 26. ♦ **"Sean Scully: Wall of Light."** The American abstract painter's recent work is inspired by the light and colors he saw on travels in Mexico in the early eighties. Opens Sept. 26. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Projects 83: Monika Sosnowska."** Sosnowska has torn open a jagged little gash between the museum's second and third levels for viewers to peer through, up into an anonymous white-walled space; the floor below is littered with plasticky shards. As an art work, "The Hole" is more of a one-liner than a revolutionary gesture, but it's still fun to see Yoshio Taniguchi's precious über-modern temple punctured, just a tiny bit, for the sake of art. Through Nov. 27. ♦ **"New Photography 2006: Jonathan Monk, Barbara Probst, Jules Spinatsch."** Through Jan. 8. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper."** Through Sept. 29. ♦ **"Zaha Hadid."** Through Oct. 25. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Picasso and American Art"** looks at the Spanish artist's influence on Americans from Stuart Davis to John Graham, Jackson Pollock to Andy Warhol. Opens Sept. 28. ♦ A series of large-scale drawings by Los Angeles-based artist **Mark Grotjean** fills the first-floor gallery. The colorful geometric abstractions are composed with multiple vanishing points. Through Jan. 7. ♦ Much of **"Full House,"** the Whitney's seventy-fifth-anniversary extravaganza, remains open into the fall, including the Pop art on the third floor (through Oct. 8), the Abstract Expressionism on the second floor (through Oct. 15), and the magnificent fifth-floor display of the works of Edward Hopper (through Dec. 3). (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Gustav Klimt: Five Paintings from the Collection of Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer"** includes the 1907 gold-and-silver-laced portrait of Adele, which will be joining the Neue Galerie's permanent collection. Through Oct. 9. (Open Thursdays and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Nadine Robinson: Alles Grau in Grau Malen."** Through Oct. 22. ♦ **"Quid Pro Quo,"** an exhibition of work by the museum's 2005-06 artists-in-residence, Rashawn Griffin, Karyn Olivier, and Clifford Owens. Through Oct. 28. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6; Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

ELINOR CARUCCI
Mining marital and familial intimacy, Carucci stages photographs that, no matter how formally stylized,

always manage to pack an emotional punch. "Crisis," the best of the three series intertwined here, illustrates a period of tension between the photographer and her husband, Eran, with color images that have the simplicity and gravity of allegorical tableaux. In one, the couple are seated on either side of filmy white curtains, Elinor outside on a balcony, eyes closed, Eran inside in the dimness, looking imploringly into the camera as if it could reveal what his wife was withholding. Although Carucci is frequently nude and sometimes distraught, she rarely seems undefended, and never powerless. Through Oct. 21. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-750-7070.)

GIORGIO MORANDI

This is the second gallery show of the Italian still-life painter (1890-1964) that New York has seen in two years; like its predecessor at Schoormans, it consists of just six paintings and two works on paper, and, as at Schoormans, the results are stunning. Maybe it's just that Morandis always look wonderful in groups, but these family reunions bring out the best in the small, near-monochromatic canvases; together, their modest voices achieve a symphonic splendor. Through Oct. 28. (Thiebaud, 42 E. 76th St. 212-737-9759.)

ALEXI WORTH

Witty, well-made paintings that flout the direct approach. "Lenscap" foregrounds—literally, forcefully, funnily—what would be an error in a photograph, an accidental exposure as the lens cap is being drawn away from the camera. The Titian-esque foliage of an oak tree is visible beyond stumpy bits of fingers, but we'll never know for sure what the big black circle of painted plastic eclipses. A pair of paintings depict a woman lost in thought and distracted by a magazine; in each, her face is largely obscured by a man's shadow. Bald men tip their heads onto women's bare shoulders, forming almost indecipherable flesh-tone compositions. We're blocked from seeing or interpreting at every turn, but the effect is engaging rather than frustrating. Worth's smoothly painted warped shapes—bulbous foreheads, stretched-out torsos—add a cartoonish, Currin-ish note of further jokiness. Through Oct. 7. (Moore, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-247-2111.)

Short List

WALKER EVANS: UBS, 1285 Sixth Ave. 212-713-2885. Through Nov. 17. **ANISH KAPOOR:** Public Art Fund, Rockefeller Center, Fifth Ave. at 50th St. 212-980-4575. Through Oct. 27. **MALERIE MARDER:** Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444. Through Oct. 7. **ANNETTE MESSAGER / YANG FUDONG:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through Oct. 14. **FRANZ ROH:** Ubu, 416 E. 59th St. 212-753-4444. Through Dec. 22. **ANDY WARHOL:** L & M Arts, 45 E. 78th St. 212-861-0020. Through Oct. 7.

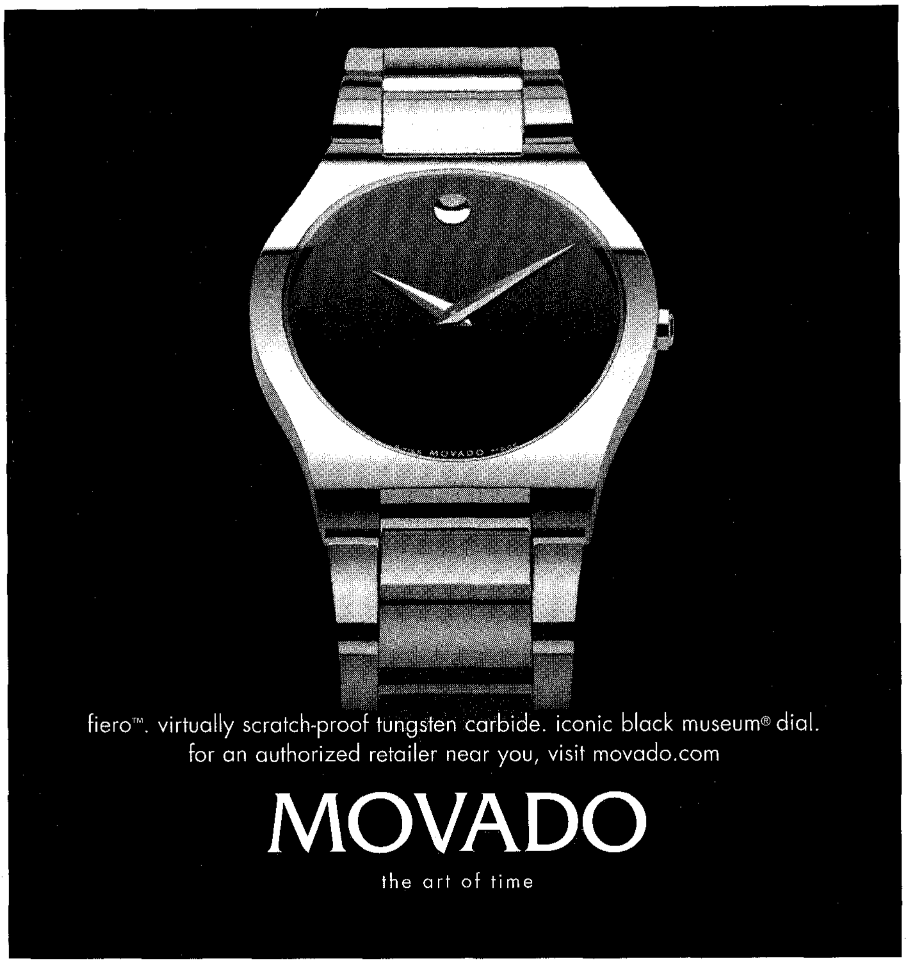
GALLERIES—CHELSEA

BRIAN CALVIN / JIM LAMBIE

Calvin's sylphs are painted with flat bright colors, their faces broken into geometric fields; his work has been compared, not unfairly, to that of Alex Katz. But while Katz's paintings roil with suppressed drama, Calvin's are blank slates. This is painting so aggressively banal that it threatens to erase itself, and yet one senses that this may be the new frontier of painting; the endgame for younger artists (Greg Bogin, over at Leo Koenig, is another example) is to see how closely one can emulate "degraded" kitsch images without actually falling over the edge. In the back room, Lambie continues his second-generation (possibly third) punk invasion of art with "Byrds," a series of paint-dripped sculptures that look like Henry Moores covered in blood or droppings. Through Oct. 14. (Kern, 532 W. 20th St. 212-367-9663.)

JENNIFER DALTON

Nowadays, information about the art business is circulated and consumed like baseball statistics. Rather than becoming hamstrung by the onslaught, Dalton turns these tidbits into art. A wall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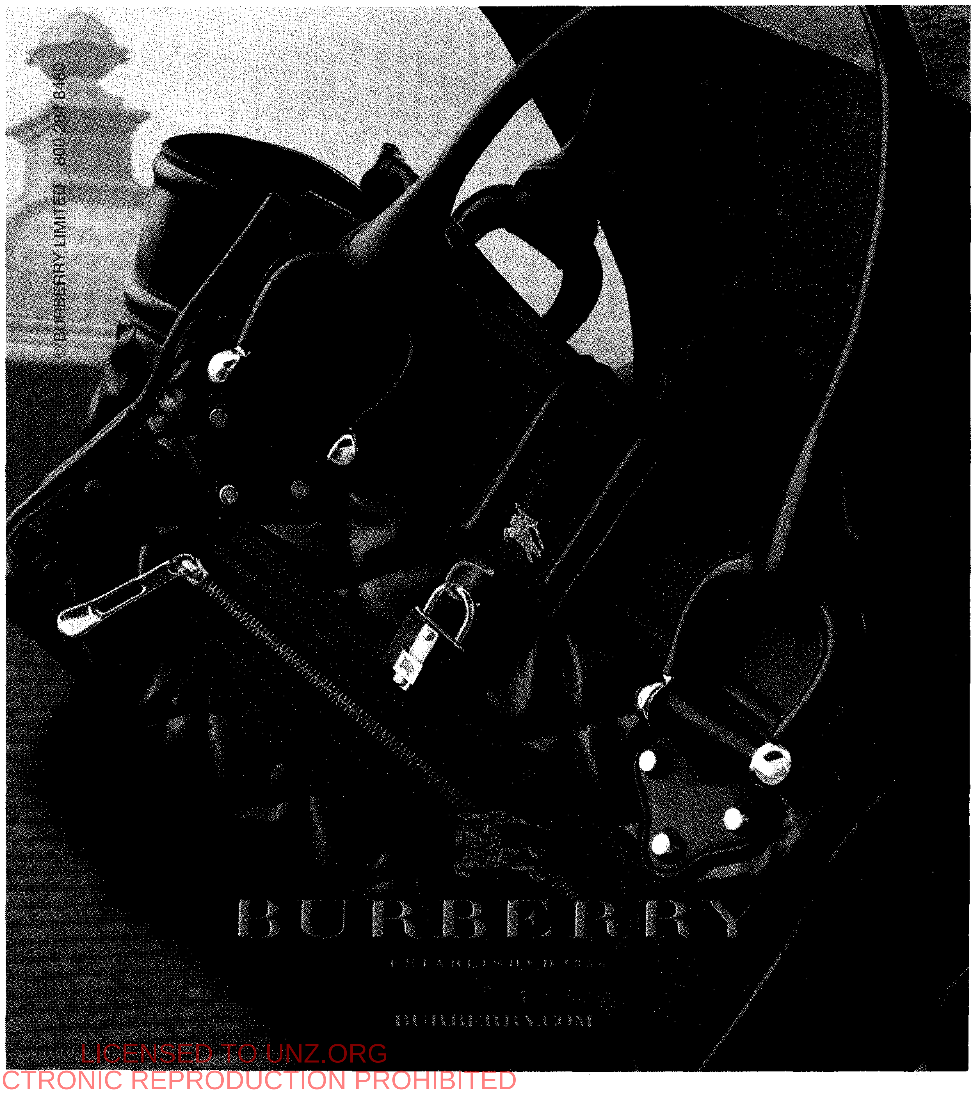
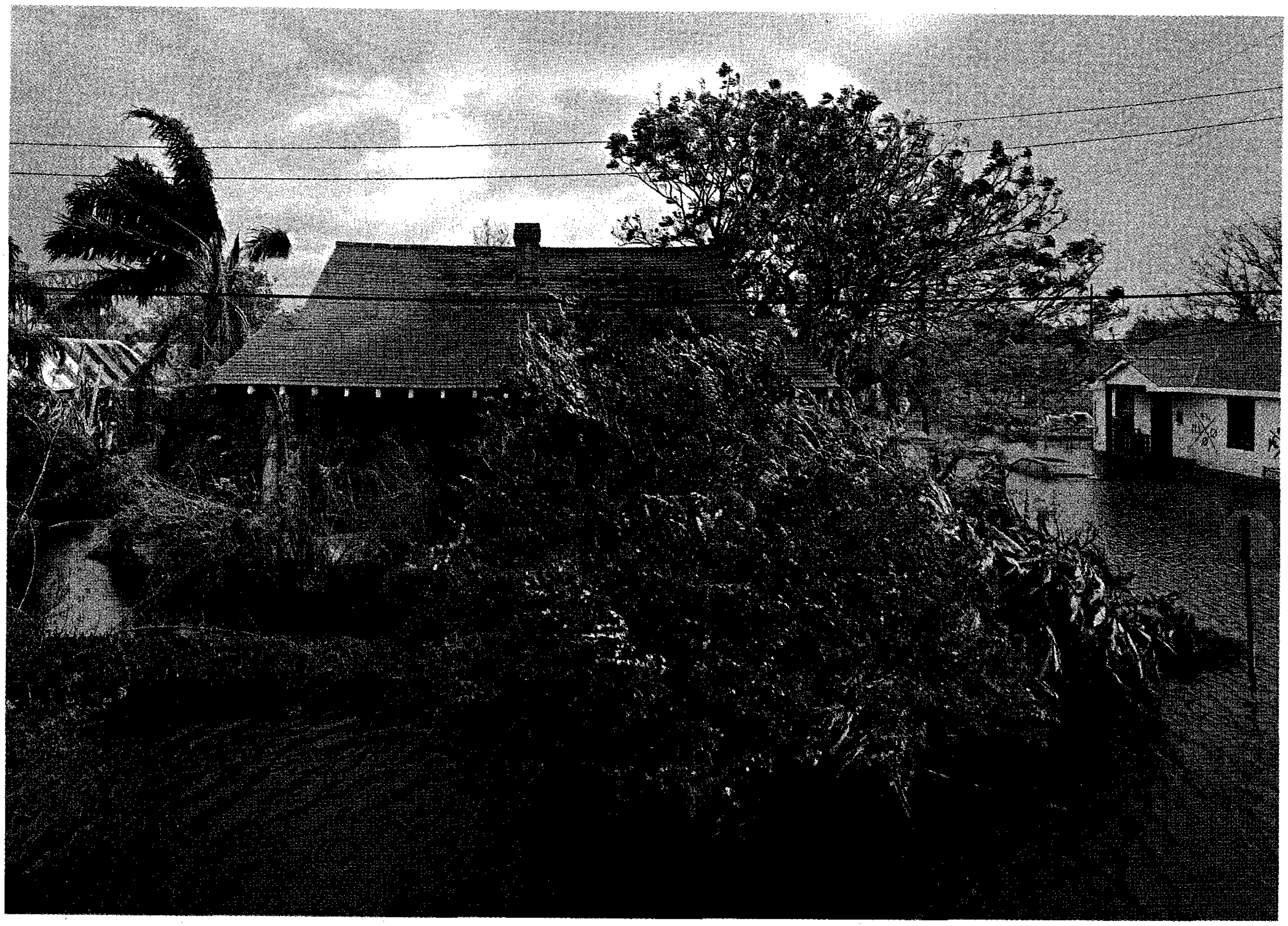


of miniature action figures laden with shopping bags details the tastes ("old masters," "contemporary," "tribal art") of prominent collectors. A slide show of graphs and charts asks, "How Do Artists Live?" (Answer: twenty-five per cent get money from their parents; eight-hundredths of a per cent report income from illegal sources.) A case filled with gray rubber bracelets offers viewers a chance to identify themselves as "losers" or "pigs," reiterating how, in the art-plus-business equation, no one comes out clean. Through Oct. 14. (Winkleman/Plus Ultra, 637 W. 27th St. 212-643-3152.)



Robert Polidori's photographs of New Orleans in the days after Hurricane Katrina are now on view at the Met.

ISCA GREENFIELD-SANDERS

If Edward Hopper were a man of the suburbs instead of the city, he might have painted works like these. Greenfield-Sanders emulates the soft, sanded-down look of Hopper's figures and the rigorous compositional architecture, although her vantage points are aerial rather than earthbound. Her works function like back-yard pastorals, peopled with swimmers in pools and loungers in deck chairs looking out over dark, Cheever-esque landscapes. Found photographs serve as source material for these works—a genetic influence, perhaps, since her father is the photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Through Oct. 14. (Goff & Rosenthal, 537 W. 23rd St. 212-675-0461.)

CHRISTOPHER MORRIS / ERICH SALOMON

Morris made these chilling color photographs over the past four years, while on assignment to cover the Bush Administration for *Time*. His subject, often seen in brutally truncated closeup, is both the imperial Presidency and its anonymous acolytes, defenders, and true believers, including Secret Service sentinels occupying the landscape like statuary. Satire would have been easy here, but Morris is clearly alarmed by what he's seen and his response is understated and sobering—all the more so when juxtaposed with Salomon's nineteen-thirties photographs of elegantly dressed statesmen (Anthony Eden and Herbert Hoover among them), most of which have the look of paparazzi party snaps. Through Oct. 7. (Hasted Hunt, 529 W. 20th St. 212-627-0006.)

VIK MUNIZ

Muniz, who rarely fails to entertain and amaze, shows "Pictures of Junk," monumental color photographs of large-scale drawings made with bits and pieces from a recycling yard in Brazil. A video demystifies Muniz's process (assistants arrange barrels, bottles, wheels, stoves, iron pipes, nuts, and bolts into the desired shapes on a concrete court; he directs and records the results from a scaffold high above) but can't diminish the nutty magic of the finished images, each based on famous mythological paintings. Ingres's Oedipus and Caravaggio's Narcissus emerge from and dissolve into a riot of debris in a brave but futile attempt to reassert the power of imagination against modern chaos. Through Oct. 14. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)

JOÃO ONOFRE

The Portuguese artist Onofre is interested in performance, but he elicits others to do it rather than performing himself. Past videos found a chamber choir singing a Kraftwerk song a cappella and ballet dancers rising, like a flock of birds, on demi-pointe. "Thomas Dekker an Interview" poses questions to the actor as if he were his most famous character: the alien child in John Carpenter's 1995 movie "Village of the Damned." Dekker, unaware of the ploy, blithely answers the questions posed by the off-screen artist, but the setup means he exists in a netherworld between fiction and fact. Accompanying this is a series of photographs titled "Every Gravedigger in Lisbon"; they're all wearing sunglasses, as if to shield them from their occupation. Through Oct. 28. (I-20, at 557 W. 23rd St. 212-645-1100.)

SARAH OPPENHEIMER

Resembling a spaceship made of wood, Oppenheimer's installation features smooth, modular, walk-in forms created by high-tech manipulation of prosaic plywood sheets. A closed tube bars entry to the main space, funnelling visitors into a hallway with aerodynamically curved sides. From this corridor, a view down the barrierlike tube exposes a row of otherwise sealed-off windows; a few steps farther on, a wide porthole peers into a storage room. The simple, rectangular gallery suddenly seems disorientingly layered and complex. Through Oct. 7. (P.P.O.W., 555 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)

KAY ROSEN

The Chicagoan Kay Rosen makes some of today's most reliably piquing and pleasing word pictures this side of Ed Ruscha. On walls or paper, one or two hand-painted words or clusters of syllables detonate manifold meanings. "New Orleans" (2005-2006) consists of the block letters "OHNOAH" in two reds (one for "oh" and "ah," the other for "no") on a yellow wall; it evokes the hurricane-predicting National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), shouts of alarm, and a plea or reproach to the skipper of an ark. The work's look is solemnly jazzy, like a Big Easy funeral band. Through Oct. 21. (Lambert, 564 W. 25th St. 212-242-3611.)

JESSICA STOCKHOLDER

The ravishing bricoleur, a rococo inheritor of Robert Rauschenberg's Combine aesthetic, returns with new transformations of common stuff: flea-market furniture, plastic buckets, fake fur, nylon mesh, paint, lighting fixtures (lighted), a derelict Corona typewriter. Involving walls, floor, and ceiling, the works register as exploded abstract pictures, poised and mysteriously coherent. They aren't junk sculpture, because nothing in them feels junky. No precious materials could be beautiful in the precise, incessantly surprising ways

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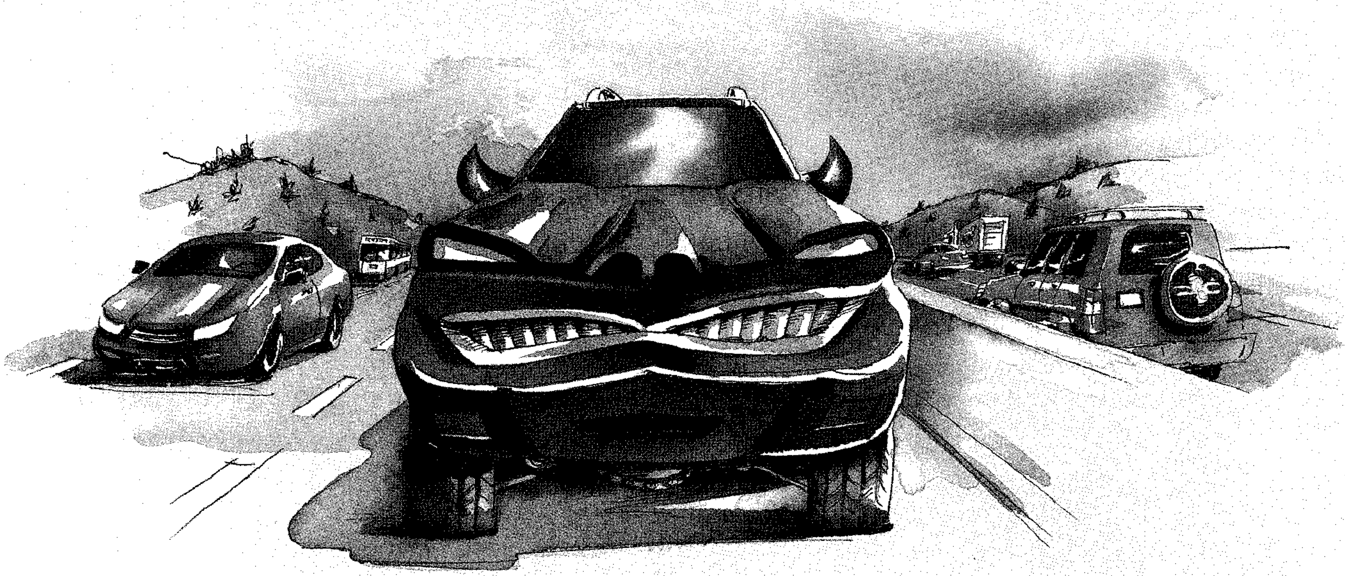

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
FAMILY AFFAIRS

If you can endure the opening minutes—creaky British acting and rear-screen projection to match—then the rest of "Bonjour Tristesse" will offer its riveting rewards. Otto Preminger's adaptation of Françoise Sagan's novel plays at MOMA on Oct. 2, and no work enshrines so neatly the director's desire to cast a calm eye on the flaky and the florid. David Niven plays a merry widower, splitting his idleness between Paris and the South of France; Jean Seberg is his daughter, and their rapport—all first names and kisses on the lips—is the most unsettling sight in the movie. Their life of coasting hits a reef when the father proposes to a flame-haired designer (Deborah Kerr) who comes to stay in the sun, importing the values of the grownup world. A plan is hatched to defeat her, and from that silliness comes a tragic mistake. All involved are at their peak: Niven bravely denting his carefree image, Seberg both cruel and unknowing in her halter-neck dress, and Preminger staying with her right up to the devastation of the final shot, a face staring into a mirror.

—*Anthony Lane*

EVERETT COLLECTION

that Stockholder requires. Through Oct. 14. (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St. 212-744-7400.)

SARA VANDERBEEK

VanDerBeek, a downtown gallerist who makes her solo début here, shows disconcertingly elegant, cannily allusive photographs of small-scale constructions and collages. Combining vintage photos, postcards, magazine clippings, fabric, jewelry, branches, and thin metal armatures, she creates delicate structures and layered arrangements that recall Calder and Cornell. The jumble of references—to Greek sculpture, Navajo blankets, Marilyn Monroe—is too scattershot to add up, but that's just fine. The work's suggestive open-endedness is an invitation to the imagination, and a welcome relief after heavy doses of overdetermined art. Through Oct. 14. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)

Short List

DONALD BAECHLER: Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through Oct. 28. **JEFF BROUWS:** Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 24th St. 212-989-7600. Through Oct. 14. **BARNABY FURNAS:** Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889. Through Oct. 21. **JESPER JUST:** Rubenstein, 527 W. 23rd St. 212-627-8000. Through Oct. 28. **KAREN KILIMNIK:** 303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121. Through Nov. 4. **NICOLA LÓPEZ:** Golden, 539 W. 23rd St. 212-727-8304. Through Oct. 14. **JOHN MCCRACKEN / JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM:** Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070. Through Oct. 14. **ALBERT OEHLEN:** Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 212-206-9100. Through Oct. 21. **CATHERINE OPIE:** Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300. Through Oct. 14. **KEN PRICE:** Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200. Through Nov. 4. **LUCAS SAMARAS:** PaceWildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 212-929-7000. Through Oct. 7. **ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI:** Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370. Through Oct. 14. **CHRIS VERENE:** Kagan, 540 W. 29th St. 212-560-0670. Through Oct. 28. **"LEAST WANTED: A CENTURY OF AMERICAN MUGSHOTS":** Kasher, 521 W. 23rd St. 212-966-3978. Through Oct. 28.

DANCE

SHEN WEI DANCE ARTS

If you know anything about the celebrated choreographer Shen Wei, you know that he's also a painter and that a painterly sensibility shapes his dances. "Re-," a meditative new piece based on a visit to Tibet, takes place on a mandala made of scraps of blue and white paper. The design of the dance is to destroy the design on the floor, slowly and inexorably, enacting a cycle of regeneration. The ululating chanting of the Tibetan nun Choying Drolma provides the score. Wei's 2003 "Rite of Spring," also on the program, is a similar ritual that uses Stravinsky's music but not his scenario, no sacrifice but a never-ending swirl of intersecting lines. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave. 212-242-0800. Sept. 26-27 at 7:30, Sept. 28-30 at 8, and Oct. 1 at 2 and 7:30.)

"AGORA II"

The site-specific choreographer Noémie LaFrance concludes her run at the vast, empty pool in Greenpoint's McCarren Park, where Bora Yoon directs the live music as scores of dancers swarm the pool. (Lorimer St. at Driggs St., Brooklyn. 718-388-6309. Sept. 27-30 at 8.)

"SKINT"

The musician, choreographer, and dancer Caitlin Cook, a founding member of the bands VIZUSA and Excepter who has danced with such downtown eminences as Neil Greenberg, Tere O'Connor, and Maria Hassabi, has put together a music and dance event for the Kitchen, her first evening-length piece. Seven women play instruments and sing as well as dance; the music and movement respond to a set of rules and structures to which the performers have agreed but which they can break at will. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Sept. 27-28 at 8 and Sept. 29-30 at 9.)

LEESAAR THE COMPANY

The Israeli contemporary choreographers Saar Harari and Lee Sher moved to New York two years ago and promptly made a name for themselves with last season's compelling "Herd of Bulls." This week at P.S. 122, they début another unflinching, intensely personal piece—with a title, "Moopim," as abstract as the unintelligible syllables that pour from Sher's mouth throughout the dance. While a downstage musician invokes the Middle East with the traditional Arabic oud, five dancers (four female, one male) move through a separate, interior world—a sometimes violent place, where dancers drop recklessly onto stiff backs and pound the floor with the backs of their thighs. Juxtaposed against the bare-bones set, the performers' ferocious, in-your-face honesty demands attention: when they undulate, they're frankly sensual, and when they struggle, they mean it. (150 First Ave. 212-352-3101. Sept. 27-30 at 8:30 and Oct. 1 at 4:30. Through Oct. 8.)

"FALL FOR DANCE"

Thanks to the ten-dollar-a-ticket policy, audiences at the third annual festival will look a lot like the lineups: pert newcomers rubbing shoulders with the established older generation. Beloved landmark works (Trisha Brown's "Set and Reset," Paul Taylor's "Syzygy," an excerpt from Bill T. Jones's "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin") alternate with anticipated débuts. New-to-New York companies include the traditional Korean Yi-Jo Lim Sun Dance Company, the French hip-hop hybrid Compagnie Frank II Louise, and the Montreal-based Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie. The Dutch National Ballet and the Pennsylvania Ballet present New York premières, while the local choreographers Stephen Petronio and Nathan Trice round out the first week's slate. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Sept. 28-30 at 8 and Oct. 1 at 2. Through Oct. 8. For complete schedule, visit www.nycitycenter.org.)

ARCHANA JOGLEKAR AND LAKSHMI VISHWANATHAN

The Sanskriti Center presents an evening of classical Indian dance, contrasting the northern kathak (which combines storytelling and strong rhythmic footwork) and the southern bharata natyam (originally a temple dance, with sections of invocation and storytelling). Vishwanathan, a highly regarded scholar of South Indian dance, is a specialist in abhinaya, or expressive dance; she is an exuberant actress, able to transform herself into a male or female god through facial expressions and movements. Joglekar, a kathak dancer, choreographer, and teacher, has also appeared in several Bollywood musicals. (Lighthouse Theatre, 111 E. 59th St. 212-427-2203. Sept. 29 at 6:30.)

SACHIYO ITO AND COMPANY

Ito débuted in Japan fifty years ago, and she's been refining the art of disappearing into her characters ever since. She marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of her New York-based company with a wide-ranging program combining classical Japanese work with her own choreography. The Japanese guest artist Shogo Fujima joins her for "Shigure Saigyo," a nineteenth-century Kabuki dance based on a fourteenth-century Noh play, and guests from Okinawa continue her company's tradition of showcasing that archipelago's more rustic and rambunctious traditions, wielding oars as martial-arts weapons and letting loose the rarely seen Okinawan version of the lion dance. (Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts, Pace University. 212-868-4444. Sept. 30 at 8.)

NEW YORK GYPSY FESTIVAL

Like Russia's Moiseyev, Hungary's Honvéd Dance Company presents folk dance in polished, theatrical form. Founded in 1982, the Budapest-based troupe makes its U.S. début with a program of Gypsy dance and music from Hungary and Transylvania. There are vigorous stick dances and funny hat dances, dances with spoons and playful courtship dances. The women twirl their skirts sweetly while the men show off, slapping themselves silly as they kick up their heels. The Lindri Ensemble and the Hegedös Folk Band provide rousing accompaniment. (Skirball Center, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-545-7536. Sept. 30 at 8.)

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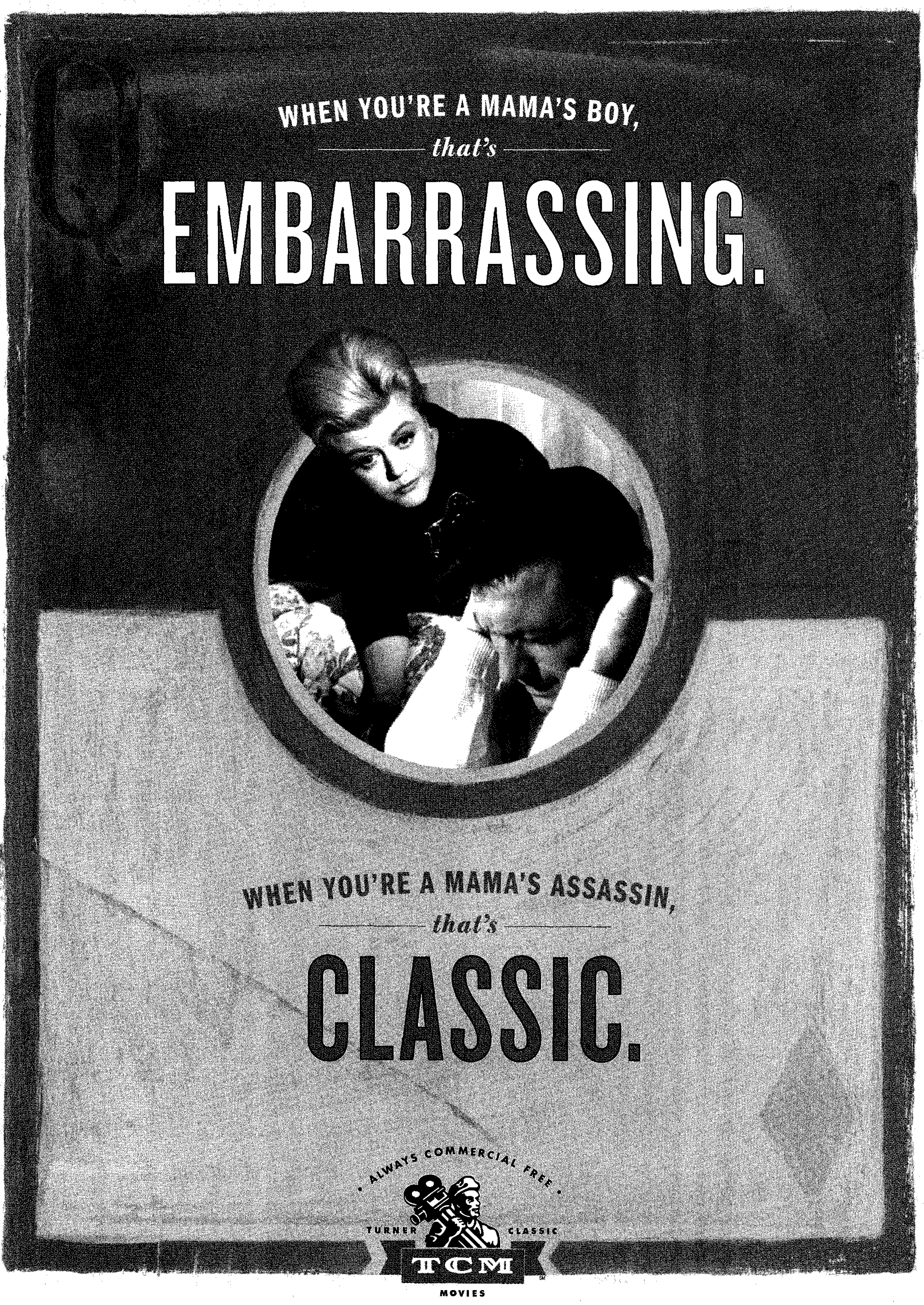
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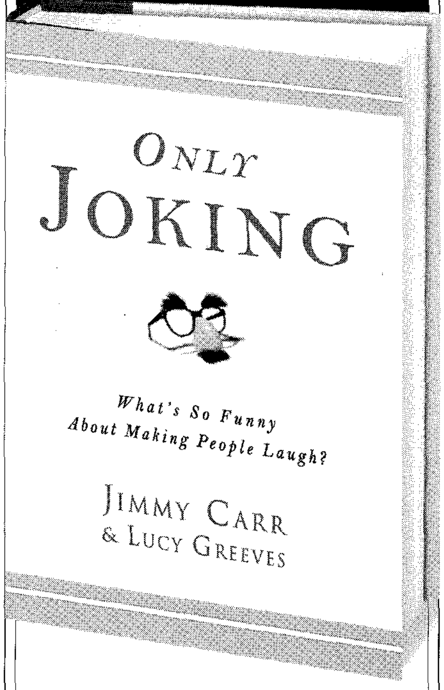
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CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's grand production of **"Idomeneo"** suits the first of Mozart's "great" operas, in which the conventions of Baroque opera seria are pushed to their breaking point by the emotional complexity and lyrical heft of the extraordinary young composer. The title role in this production has always been strongly cast: Ben Heppner will follow in the footsteps of Domingo and Pavarotti. His excellent colleagues include Dorothea Röschmann, Olga Makarina, and Kristine Jepson; James Levine, who led the 1982 première, conducts. (Sept. 28 at 7:30 and Oct. 2 at 8.) ♦ The new production of **"Madama Butterfly,"** by Anthony Minghella, features Cristina Gallardo-Domâs, a star on the rise, singing the title role, joined onstage by Marcello Giordani and Dwayne Croft; Asher Fisch. (Sept. 30 at 1:30.) ♦ To follow a brand-new "Butterfly" with a revival of Margherita Wallmann's 1966 production of **"La Gioconda,"** safely in mothballs for fifteen years, is so conservative that it's almost hip. (New choreography from Christopher Wheeldon—featuring Angel Corella, in his Met début—will liven things up.) Ponchielli's Venetian melodrama, full of famous tunes, is sung by a strong cast that includes Violeta Urmana, Olga Borodina, Aquiles Machado, and Paata Burchuladze; Bertrand de Billy. (Sept. 30 at 8.) ♦ Andrei Serban's 2005 production of Gounod's **"Faust"** certainly had its detractors. But while the director's jumble of cultural allusions—from Offenbach to William Blake—may have been too much of a good thing, he at least took the risk of making the Met part of New York's intellectual life. The cast features Ruth Ann Swenson, Ramón Vargas, and Ildar Abdrazakov; de Billy, a master of the fleet and pointed French style, conducts. (Oct. 3 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
The Frank Corsaro production of **"Die Tote Stadt"** employs films and projections (by Ronald Chase) to help define the levels of dream and reality in Erich Wolfgang Korngold's pseudo-Freudian drama, a romantic triangle set in Bruges at the end of the nineteenth century. The quasi-Straussian score, however, is a delight. It will be sung by a cast headed by Susan B. Anthony, Dan Chamandy, and Weston Hurt; George Manahan conducts. (Sept. 27 at 7:30 and Sept. 29 at 8.) ♦ Stephen Lawless's production of **"Semele"** is a funny, deft, and touching contribution to City Opera's continuing exploration of the Handel operas. In his daring reading, the secular oratorio gets a new interpretation made equally in the spirit of the work and in that of modern times, with the libretto's Roman gods relocated to the seedier underside of President Kennedy's Camelot. The soprano Elizabeth Futral and the mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux (a long-overdue City Opera début) not only make short work of Handel's vocal pyrotechnics but also lend their roles (Marilyn and Jackie, respectively) the appropriate dose of glamour; Anthony Walker thoughtfully paces the evening from the pit. (Sept. 28 and Oct. 4 at 7:30 and Sept. 30 at 1:30. These are the final performances.) ♦ Rinat Shaham, a petite but potent mezzo-soprano, is City Opera's latest cigarette girl of choice in **"Carmen,"** in performances that also feature Latonia Moore, Mark Duffin, and Adrian Gans; Ari Pelto. (Sept. 30 at 8 and Oct. 3 at 7:30.) ♦ **"La Bohème,"** with Shu-Ying Li, Elizabeth Caballero, James Valenti, and Daniel Mobbs; Manahan. (Oct. 1 at 1:30.) (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Shostakovich's name has been flitting through New York's concert programs for many months, but Lorin Maazel and the Philharmonic will mark the week of his actual centenary with an all-Shostakovich program. It consists of two favorite works: the Cello Concerto No. 1 (with Lynn Harrell, a poetic veteran soloist) and the Symphony No. 5. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Sept. 28 and Oct. 3 at 7:30 and Sept. 30 at 8.)

TABLES FOR TWO
DITCH PLAINS

29 Bedford St., at Downing St. (212-633-0202)—Ditch Plains is named after a famed surf spot in Montauk, but there's little here, beyond the menu's nice, if unremarkable, lobster roll, that suggests a seafood shack. The walls are riveted steel, the wood booths and tables are dark and sleek, and on one wall a cutout square of plaster reveals brick, hung with rusty saw blades. Behind the bar, twin TV monitors play an endless video loop of either surfing or skateboarding. Diners are sometimes outnumbered by drinkers, drawn to the nearly at-cost wine and concoctions like the Spicy Corona, a mixture of beer, tequila, lime, and hot sauce ("That one can be lethal," a waiter warned). In the clientele, at least, there seems to be some correspondence to the South Fork: most, with sweaters thrown over shoulders and popped polo collars, look like they might have a summer share in the Hamptons.

Ditch Plains got off to a slightly rocky start—complaints ranged from the lack of bellies in the fried clams to the stemless wineglasses—and it seemed like this could be the sophomore slump for Marc Murphy and Pamela Schein Murphy, who also own the reliably excellent Landmarc, in Tribeca. Then the Murphys wisely dropped the restaurant's prices and came to terms with its modest mission: pleasing but plain Americana. There's certainly satisfaction to be found in a juicy burger accompanied by vinegary pickles, or the thick, salty crab dip. And there are some surprises on the menu, like the spicy, crispy fresh fried-calamari salad. Breakfast—omelettes, egg sandwiches, and bagels with smoked salmon—is served all day. Slices of pie, from the Little Pie Company, come to the table with a can of store-bought whipped cream: tongue-in-cheek supermarket cuisine run amok.

The service here is sweet, if sometimes scattered—one night, a neighboring table had to pass over a diner's credit card after it was dropped off there by mistake. But the staff is also willing to entertain the peculiar cravings that food from one's childhood sometimes elicits. On a recent evening, a waiter managed to keep a straight face at an off-the-menu request for a meal of macaroni and cheese (which was dense and creamy, with a nice crust on top), accompanied by a hot dog—no bun, no fries. Not a problem. (Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Entrées $5-$24.)

—*Andrea Thompson*

RECITALS

MIDTOWN CONCERTS: ARTEK
The harpsichordist Gwendolyn Toth's early-music group, in residence at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, offers a little lunchtime recital featuring arias from Bach's Cantatas Nos. 97 and 51. (135 W. 31st St. Sept. 27 at 1:15. No tickets required.)

"BABI YAR REMEMBERED"
Illuminating Shostakovich's enormous range as a composer, the duo pianists Misha and Cipa Dichter—along with the bass Valentin Peytchinov—give the world première of the first movement of the two-piano arrangement of the Symphony No. 13, "Babi Yar" (composed in memory of the Ukrainian Jews who were massacred there by the Nazis in 1941), along with the Concertina for Two Pianos and a selection of songs. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who wrote the poem that Shostakovich set, will be on hand to read it. (Edmond J. Safra Hall, Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36 Battery Pl. 646-437-4202. Sept. 27 at 7.)

FRIENDS & ENEMIES OF NEW MUSIC
The group with the fractious title is actually a cozy bunch of composers who present performances of works in a wide variety of styles. They begin their eighteenth season with music by Ben Yarmolinsky, David Sisco, and David Cutler ("Super Power"), the winner of their annual composers' competition; the performers include the pianist Kathleen Supové and the tenor Paul Sperry. (Christ and St. Stephen's Church, 120 W. 69th St. Sept. 27 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

"BARANGAY RHYTHMS"
Joe's Pub will provide the cool and relaxed setting for a concert offered by the ensemble of the Filipino-American composer and percussionist Susie Ibarra, whose work mixes Spanish and Asian influences and makes prominent use of the *kulintang*, a set of traditional Filipino gongs. (425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200. Sept. 27 at 9:30.)

VLADIMIR FELTSMAN
The Russian pianist, master of a muscular yet fine-grained style, downshifts to the light touch needed for the fortepiano (in this case, a copy of one by Anton Walter, one of Mozart's favorite makers) in the first three concerts of a two-week cycle exploring Mozart's complete piano sonatas. (Tishman Auditorium, the New School, 66 W. 12th St. Sept. 28 at 7:30. ♦ Mannes College of Music, 150 W. 85th St. Sept. 30 and Oct. 3 at 7:30.) (212-229-5488.)

BARGEMUSIC
Sept. 28-29 at 7:30: Seymour Lipkin, a beloved veteran of the keyboard, brings his worldly style to an all-Schubert program (including the Sonatas in A Minor, D. 784, and in A Major, D. 959). ♦ Sept. 30 at 7:30: The flutist Jeanne Galway (wife of you know who) and her Zephyr Trio offer a decorous, Francophone program of sonatas by Debussy and Poulenc along with trios for flute, cello, and piano by Martinů, Weber, and Lowell Liebermann. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083. For full schedule, see www.bargemusic.org.)

NEW JUILLIARD ENSEMBLE
Joel Sachs's ensemble, an essential link in New York's new-music network, launches the season with a bevy of American premières of works by such composers as Salvatore Sciarrino, Huw Watkins, and Melissa Hui ("Speaking in Tongues"). (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School. Sept. 30 at 8. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-769-7406.)

AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM
Classical and modern music meet in the Forum's sleek little concert hall. Sept. 30 at 8: Thomas Bagwell accompanies the tenor Scott Murphree and the baritone Keith Phares in a program that features a bevy of Schubert songs along with contemporary American selections by Lee Hoiby, Jake Heggie, and Richard Hundley. ♦ Oct. 3 at 8: Another program features the Viennese pianist Johannes Marian performing solo works by avant-garde American and Austrian composers, including Morton Feldman, Tom Johnson, and the venerable Friedrich Cerha (best known for completing the orchestration of Berg's "Lulu"), who turned eighty this year. (11 E. 52nd St. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-319-5300, ext. 222.)

MOVIES OPENING

THE GUARDIAN
Andrew Davis directed this drama, about a Coast Guard recruit (Ashton Kutcher) who is commanded by an emotionally scarred officer (Kevin Costner). Opening Sept. 29. (In wide release.)

A GUIDE TO RECOGNIZING YOUR SAINTS
Dito Montiel's drama about growing up in Astoria, starring Robert Downey, Jr., Shia LaBeouf, Dianne Wiest, Channing Tatum, and Rosario Dawson. Directed by Jeff Tremaine. Opening Sept. 29. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square.)

THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Sept. 27. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

LOUDQUIETLOUD: A FILM ABOUT THE PIXIES
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Sept. 29. (Cinema Village.)

OPEN SEASON
An animated comedy about a bear who relies on a deer for his survival in hunting season. With the voices of Martin Lawrence and Debra Messing. Directed by Roger Allers, Jill Culton, and Anthony Stacchi. Opening Sept. 29. (In wide release.)

THE QUEEN
Helen Mirren and Michael Sheen star as Queen Elizabeth II and Tony Blair in a docudrama, directed by Stephen Frears, about the British government's response to Princess Diana's death. Opening Sept. 30. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

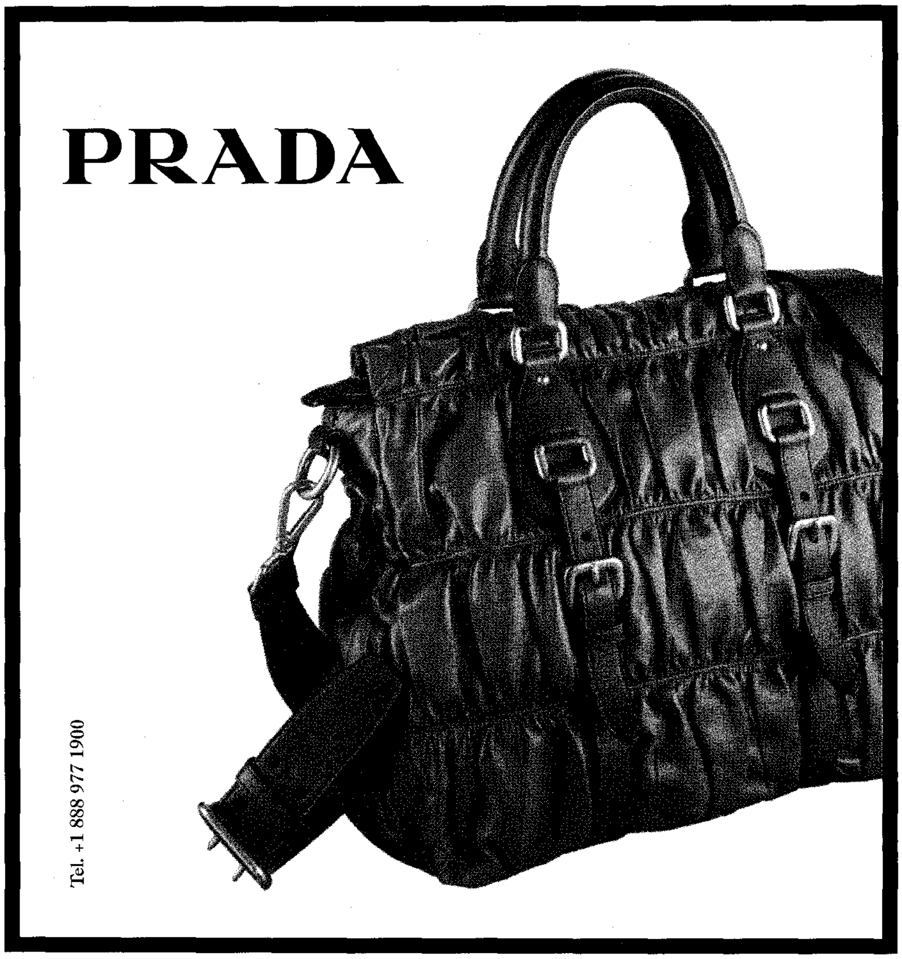
SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS
Todd Phillips directed and co-wrote this comedy, about a charm-school teacher (Billy Bob Thornton) who pursues the woman (Jacinda Barrett) whom his student (Jon Heder) loves. Opening Sept. 29. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

ALL THE KING'S MEN
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

THE BLACK DAHLIA
This Brian De Palma movie about the notorious Betty Short murder case, from 1947, which was the basis for a 1987 novel by James Ellroy, suffers from rampant allusiveness to other movies set in Los Angeles. The picture is a kind of fattened goose that's been stuffed with . . . goose-liver pâté. It's overrich and fundamentally unsatisfying. De Palma's screenwriter, Josh Friedman, shovels tons of undigested Ellroy onto the screen. The hero, an honest young cop named Dwight Bleichert (Josh Hartnett), toiling at the edges of a tangled mess of betrayal stretching back for decades, never quite understands what's going on, and often we don't either. The narrative is so awkwardly arranged that when the pieces of the puzzle finally fall into place, the effect is less dramatic than diagrammatic—character A slept with character B thirty years earlier, and, oh, yes, all of that connects to crimes X, Y, and Z. With Aaron Eckhart as Dwight's partner; Scarlett Johansson in a sweater, her hair up, as a lushly sensual baby Lana Turner; Hilary Swank, her mouth twisted with desire, as a lecherous, lying, raven-haired heiress; and Mia Kirshner as Betty Short herself—a slender, frightened girl glimpsed in some screen tests, a girl desperately eager to please.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/18/06.) (In wide release.)

CHRONICLE OF A DISAPPEARANCE
After twelve years in New York, Elia Suleiman returned to his native Nazareth to make this subtle,



witty, documentary-based comedy of life in internal exile as an Israeli Arab. The first part, "Personal Diary," offers drolly restrained images of sleepy village life: family squabbles, shopkeepers selling Christian baubles for tourists, wedding processions—in short, a normalcy that the lightly sketched background of simmering pain and offscreen conflict skews into the realm of illusion. The second part, which Suleiman labels "Political Diary," concerns his move to Jerusalem, where he meets Adan (Ola Tabari), a single young Arab woman to whom neither Arabs nor Jews will rent an apartment. As a member of a guerrilla theatre group, she stages a piece in which the bumbling Israeli police unwittingly participate. Suleiman has a keen eye and ear for the telling detail, but, like the acrobat he shows rehearsing in a Jerusalem parking lot, he is a master of sleight of hand: he constructs his film disingenuously around the politics that he omits. Nonetheless, his extraordinarily graceful artistry and rhetoric are as substantial as the questions they raise. Released in 1996. In Arabic, Hebrew, French, English, and Russian.—*Richard Brody* (Walter Reade Theatre; Sept. 27.)

CRANK

A hyperactive Jason Statham continues his rise to stardom in this action drama, about a poisoned hit man racing around L.A. to find an antidote. The film, written and directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, careens around town as Statham's character tracks down the bad guys, rescues his girlfriend (Amy Smart), and chugs down all manner of energy supplements to keep his buzz alive (in the "Speed"-meets-"D.O.A." premise, he dies if his adrenaline level drops). The relentless editing and needless sadism substitute for any intriguing visceral jolts, but Statham delivers a lively performance; he easily outruns the film.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

GRIDIRON GANG

All those years in the wrestling ring have given The Rock (Dwayne Johnson) an amusing self-awareness. He's charismatic and stentorian and doesn't take a damn thing seriously. In this film, another crowd-pleasing take on "The Longest Yard," he plays a tough but tender coach who inspires a group of juvenile offenders to take their violence to the playing field instead of the streets. The director, Phil Joanou, gives the material a confident staging, even when the heavy-handed speeches about teamwork and responsibility threaten to reduce the movie to an after-school special.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

THE GROUND TRUTH

An upsetting but mesmerizing series of interviews with stunned veterans of the current Iraq war, many of them suffering from the "intrusive thoughts" characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder—in this case, memories of civilian deaths caused by American fire. Putting it in an older language, they suffer from an inability to expiate crimes that they think they have committed. Yet, if expiation is impossible, penance is not: they can talk. This confessional movie is the vets' spiritual claim on sanity. The director and producer, Patricia Foulkrod, cuts the recollections and ruminations into fragments and then reassembles the fragments into chronological stages: recruitment, boot camp, combat, return, followed by the long, dismaying coda, in which the men and women struggle not to fall apart. As Foulkrod shifts from one vet to another, some of them maimed for life, there are moving bits of testimony, but we may balk at the abrupt editing, which leaves anecdotes and emotions hanging. We would like to see how these lives fit—or don't fit—together.—*D.D.* (9/18/06) (Sunshine Cinema.)

Marlene Dietrich stars in "Blonde Venus," at Moving Image.

MAURICE VELLEKOOP

HALF NELSON

The young Canadian actor Ryan Gosling is quietly charismatic as Dan Dunne, a schoolteacher in a tough section of Brooklyn who knows how to teach history to his thirteen- and fourteen-year-old African-American students. Dunne is smart and dedicated, but he's also freebasing cocaine. When a girl in his class, Drey (Shareeka Epps), catches him in the act, a bond develops between them. The movie, made with a handheld camera by the team of Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, is alert to the tensions in the two characters' lives and the raffish neighborhood milieu, but one comes away from it thinking that the filmmakers have coddled their hero. He is, after all, failing not only himself but the students who depend on him. The sources of Dunne's addiction are obscure, but "Half Nelson" nevertheless builds his problems into a parable of the misfortunes of liberalism.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

HOLLYWOODLAND

Allen Coulter's mystery movie is itself hard to unpack: part period drama, part open-ended thriller, it pays uneasy homage to a bad dream of stardom. Ben Affleck plays George Reeves, the cheerful hulk of the nineteen-fifties who was unable to repeat on the big screen his popular triumph as Superman on the small one. Diane Lane turns in yet another fine performance, at once strong-minded and easily bruised, in the role of Reeves's older married lover. Reeves's death, in 1959, has long been one of the minor enigmas of Hollywood, and we duly follow a fictional detective (Adrien Brody) as he tries, and fails, to deliver a clear solution. The problem is not just that Brody seems too reedy and gentle for a private eye but that the aftermath of Reeves's career is no match for the brief and glamorous flare of the living man. In the end, the movie belongs to Lane, for her portrait of a beautiful woman mounting a wry, doomed defense against the abrasions of time. With Bob Hoskins as her husband, a doting, cuckolded thug.—*Anthony Lane* (9/11/06) (In wide release.)

THE ILLUSIONIST

Edward Norton as a master magician of plebeian origin in late-nineteenth-century imperial Austria, Jessica Biel as the young duchess he's in love with, Rufus Sewell as the smart but sadistic crown prince who wants to marry the duchess and take over the empire, and Paul Giamatti as the police inspector who is loyal to the prince but fascinated by the magician. Unconvincing controversy over whether the magician's playing with the relation of reality to illusion constitutes a political threat to the empire or just a threat to the prince's romantic ambitions; intelligent, beautifully photographed production in rather dry, very delicate color (Dick Pope is the cinematographer), but, all in all, a great deal of craftsmanship wasted over nothing. Directed by Neil Burger; based (sort of) on a story by Steven Millhauser. Shot in the Czech Republic.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

KNIFE IN THE WATER

The work of a wunderkind who grew up fast—Roman Polanski made this film in 1961, when he was twenty-nine, but it has the low-key wryness and technical assurance you expect from directors twice as old. This sinister, unpredictable fusion of psychological drama and unromantic comedy unfolds mostly during a daylong sailboat journey. When a well-off husband and wife (Leon Niemczyk, Jolanta Umecka) take on a student (Zygmunt Malanowicz) as a deckhand, sexual tension and masculine rivalry add fire to built-in class jealousies. Using all his worldliness and expertise, Niemczyk, a successful sports reporter, bullies both the buxom young Umecka and the woefully unseaworthy Malanowicz. But, even when the husband's two victims have sex, "Knife" doesn't become merely a triangle or a crime-of-passion movie. It's about three people trying to transcend a shrivelling recognition of their limitations. Shortly before the wife and the student couple, she tells him, "You're just the same. Only younger by half, weaker, and twice as stupid." Polanski maintains an ultra-modern cool tone; no one leaves the water unscathed. The script is by Polanski and Jerzy Skolimowski. In Polish.—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade Theatre; Oct. 1-2.)

THE LAST KISS

The tiresome premise of Tony Goldwyn's remake of an Italian hit film from 2001—a twenty-nine-year-old architect, Michael (Zach Braff), freaks out at the news that his girlfriend is pregnant and falls for a cute college girl (the intriguing Rachel Bilson)—plays out ploddingly in spite of some terrific acting. Jacinda Barrett steals the show as Michael's beautiful, reasonable life partner, offering a volatile, realistic portrayal of a woman scorned, and a subplot with Blythe Danner and Tom Wilkinson as her unhappy parents threatens to be more interesting than any scene involving the unctuous Braff.—*Shauna Lyon* (In wide release.)

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

A charming, independently made family comedy about a winner-take-all society—America—that is driving its citizens crazy. Its hero and victim, Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear), is a motivational speaker who has invented a nine-step program for success. His seven-year-old daughter, Olive (Abigail Breslin), is entering a Little Miss Sunshine contest; his stepson, Dwayne (Paul Dano), has a private dream in which he is a Nietzschean Übermensch; his wife's brother (Steve Carell), whom the family has taken in, is the No. 1 Proust

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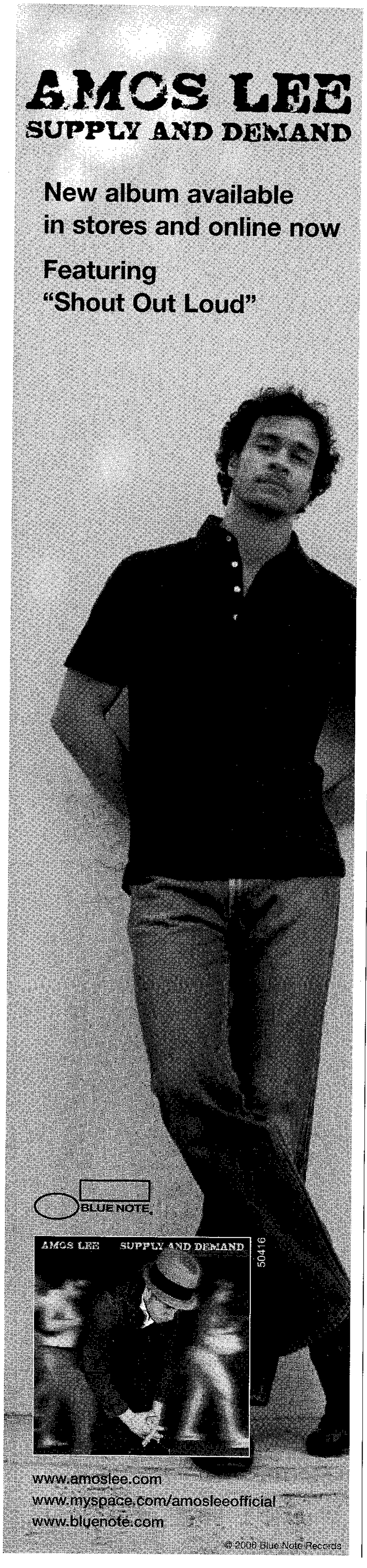
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scholar in the country but has made a fool of himself over a male graduate student who has leaped into the bed of the No. 2 Proust scholar. Is winning everything? The writer, Michael Arndt, and the husband-and-wife directing team, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, narrowly avoid the family-comedy pitfalls of whimsy and mush, but Arndt has a good ear for domestic irritations and the acting is just tough enough to keep us off balance. With Alan Arkin and Toni Collette as the family's realists.—*D.D.* (7/31/06) (In wide release.)

LOUDQUIETLOUD: A FILM ABOUT THE PIXIES
A loving portrait of the rock band, by fans and for fans. The documentary filmmakers Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin follow the four members of the Pixies—the front man, Charles Thompson (a.k.a. Black Francis), the bassist and vocalist, Kim Deal, the guitarist, Joey Santiago, and the drummer, David Lovering—on their unexpected reunion tour in 2004, twelve years after their unceremonious breakup. The intimate road footage in this well-made film highlights how the members of one of the most beloved underground rock bands of the early nineties can barely hold a conversation with each other, even on a lonely tour, and reveals how each of them has—or has not—grown up.—*S.L.* (Cinema Village.)

RENAISSANCE
The plot is nothing new. A woman goes missing in a shadow-drenched city and a taciturn cop, assigned to the case, unpeels her secret, and, with it, a lurking conspiracy. What lifts Christian Volckman's movie above other recent stabs at film noir is the precision with which it sets out to look, and feel, as noir as technically possible. The story is semi-animated, with the gestures of real actors transferred by motion capture to the stylized figures who stalk the black-and-white landscape. (Grays are kept to a minimum, lest they dilute the mood.) The setting is Paris, just under fifty years from now, and Volckman toys with the gothic elongations to which the city has succumbed; the result may not be credible, but it flirts cleverly with the limits of the imaginable. The chief villain turns out to be the shrivelled dialogue, which—even though spoken by performers such as Daniel Craig and Jonathan Pryce—would probably sound better in French.—*A.L.* (9/25/06) (Sunshine Cinema.)

THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP
The new project from Michel Gondry proves that he is still determined to treat cinema as an advanced form of child's play. Gael García Bernal plays a young Mexican, recently returned to Paris, who takes a dreary job and meets a couple of French girls when they drill through the wall of his apartment. One of them (Charlotte Gainsbourg) almost becomes his paramour, and his stumbles toward her—not to mention the dreams that he wraps around her—make up the bulk of the story. Gondry scorns any need to mark the border of sleeping and waking, slipping like a spy between the two; normal conversations keep branching off into fantasy, and a grinning Bernal takes every change in stride. The outcome is sometimes jubilant but mostly shapeless, and Gondry could have used some help from Charlie Kaufman, with whom he concocted "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." Despite the sprightly makeover, it's the old problem: when people start telling you their dreams, you don't know where to look.—*A.L.* (9/25/06) (In wide release.)

TOO LATE BLUES
John Cassavetes's first Hollywood movie, from 1961, tells the grim, moody story of Ghost Wakefield (Bobby Darin), an L.A. jazz pianist whose quintet is reduced to playing day gigs in schools and parks. His band members are impatient for success, but his devotion to his art prevents him from making commercial compromises. A soft-voiced, emotionally damaged singer, Jessica Polanski (Stella Stevens), takes Ghost's music to a new level, but their fragile romance makes him her protector when he can barely fend for himself. The grinding night world of killer cocktail parties and rough pickup bars, artistic talent and sleazy exploiters was Cassavetes's own, and he films it with fury and tenderness. He coaxed impressive performances from the young, unpolished Darin and Stevens: speaking quietly, breathily, desperately, they convey wounded inner lives with a naïve directness. For his story of musicians, Cassavetes used the weighty studio equipment to make a new, visual music: his screen-filling, soul-baring closeups play out in expansive durations filled by a lifetime of tangled emotions. If Ghost's downfall and redemption reek of studio compromise, the film's ravaging outbursts, and the sculptural beauty of its images, are pure, hard, and true.—*R.B.* (BAM Rose Cinemas; Oct. 3.)

Also Playing

CONFETTI: In wide release. **THE COVENANT:** In wide release. **EVERYONE'S HERO:** In wide release. **FEARLESS:** In wide release. **FLYBOYS:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—In première. Sept. 27-28 at 7:30 and 9:30: "The Decay of Fiction" (2002, Pat O'Neill). ♦ "Essential Cinema." Sept. 29 at 7:30: "Wavelength" (1967, Michael Snow). ♦ Sept. 30 at 7:30: "< — >" (Snow, 1969). ♦ Oct. 1 at 5:30: "A Sixth of the World" (1926, Dziga Vertov; silent). ♦ Oct. 1 at 6 and 7:30: "Carriage Trade" (1973, Warren Sonbert). ♦ Oct. 1 at 7:15: "Shagai, Soviet!" (1925-26, Vertov). ♦ "The Secret Life of Anthology Film Archives." Sept. 30 at 8: Short-film program.

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Men Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock & Jimmy Stewart." Sept. 28 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Rope" (1948). ♦ Sept. 29 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956). ♦ Sept. 30 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Rear Window" (1954). ♦ Oct. 1 at 3, 6, and 9: "Vertigo" (1958). ♦ Through Oct. 11: "J'aime le Cinéma Américain: Agnès B. Selects." Oct. 2 at 7: "Seven Chances" (1925, Buster Keaton; silent). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Too Late Blues" (†).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Sept. 27-Oct. 3 at 1, 3:45, 6:45, and 9:30: "Army of Shadows" (1969, Jean-Pierre Melville; in French). ♦ Through Oct. 5: "Pythonalot." Sept. 27-28 at 1:30, 3:20, 5:10, 7, and 9: "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" (1975, Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones). ♦ Sept. 29-30 at 1, 5:10, and 9:20: "The Meaning of Life" (1983, Jones). ♦ Sept. 29-30 at 3:15 and 7:25: "Life of Brian" (1979, Jones). ♦ Oct. 1-2 at 1, 3:30, 6, and 8:30: "Brazil: The Director's Cut" (1985-96, Gilliam). ♦ Oct. 3 at 3:10 and 7:30: "Time Bandits" (1981, Gilliam). The 7:30 screening will be introduced by the director. ♦ Oct. 3 at 9:40: "A Fish Called Wanda" (1988, Charles Crichton).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—French comedies. Oct. 3 at 12:30, 4, and 7: "Liberté-Oléron" (2001, Bruno Podalydès; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—Through Oct. 29: Eric Rohmer's "Six Moral Tales." Sept. 29-Oct. 1 at noon: "My Night at Maud's" (1969; in French). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Sept. 29-30: "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" (2001, John Cameron Mitchell), with live performances and a costume contest. The Sept. 30 screening will be introduced by the director. ♦ "Ecotopia." Oct. 2 at 7: Short films about New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

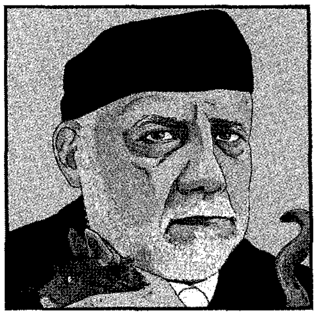
LINCOLN PLAZA CINEMAS
Broadway at 63rd St. (212-757-2280)—The films of Pedro Almodóvar. Call for showtimes. Sept. 27-28: "Law of Desire" (1987; in Spanish). ♦ Sept. 29-Oct. 3: "Matador" (1986; in Spanish).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—The films of Su Friedrich. Sept.

LARA TOMLIN

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
EYE TO EYE

Gorgeous and indigestible, "Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a glut of wonderful art works that once (or twice) passed through the hands of the storied Parisian dealer. Vollard, the son of a colonial notary, came to Paris in 1887 to study law and stayed to open a gallery that attracted the patronage of Degas and Renoir and the stock-in-trade of Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Bonnard, Vuillard, and so on down a starry list of artists who, in the modern way, built careers through private commerce rather than public display. Vollard's taste was shallow. Although the first to show Picasso and Matisse, he was late to accept their greatness. (Picasso forgave him; Matisse did not.) He promoted numerous duds, which are absent from the Met. Masterpieces abound in the show, but the cumulative effect suggests exquisite food dolloped out to a chow line. For contrast, stroll through the museum's permanent collections, whose Apollonian glory of long-considered, disinterested esteem we may take too much for granted.



—Peter Schjeldahl

27 at 6 and Sept. 30 at 3: "The Ties That Bind" (1984). ♦ Sept. 30 at 5: "Damned If You Don't" (1987). ♦ "Made in NY." Sept. 27 at 6: "Requiem for a Dream" (2000, Darren Aronofsky). ♦ Sept. 28 at 6: "Hannah and Her Sisters" (1986, Woody Allen). ♦ Sept. 30 at 2: "The Godfather" (1972, Francis Ford Coppola). ♦ Oct. 1 at 1: "Taxi Driver" (1976, Martin Scorsese). ♦ Oct. 1 at 3:30: "Do the Right Thing" (1989, Spike Lee). ♦ Oct. 2 at 6:30: "The Godfather, Part II" (1974, Coppola). ♦ Films about contemporary art. Sept. 27 at 8:15 and Sept. 29 at 6: "Cleo from 5 to 7" (1961, Agnès Varda; in French). ♦ Sept. 28 at 8:30: "Two Wrenching Departures" (2006, Ken Jacobs). ♦ Through Oct. 29: The films of Otto Preminger. Oct. 1 at 2:30: "Laura" (1944). ♦ Oct. 1 at 4:30: "Advise and Consent" (1962). ♦ Oct. 2 at 6: "Saint Joan" (1957). ♦ Oct. 2 at 8:30: "Bonjour Tristesse" (1958). ♦ Special screening. Oct. 1 at 6: "Sunrise" (1927, F. W. Murnau; silent).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Special screenings. Sept. 28 at 6 and 8 and Sept. 29 at 7:30: "An Inconvenient Truth" (2006, Davis Guggenheim). ♦ Through Oct. 8: The films of Josef von Sternberg. Sept. 30 at 2 and Oct. 1 at 3: "Blonde Venus" (1932). ♦ Sept. 30 at 4:30: "The Scarlet Empress" (1934). ♦ Sept. 30 at 6:30 and Oct. 1 at 5:30: "Jet Pilot" (1957). ♦ In preview. Oct. 2 at 7:30: "Tideland" (2006, Terry Gilliam), presented by the director.

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600; for tickets, go to www.filmlinc.com)—Through Oct. 15: festival screenings. Sept. 29 at 8:15 and 9: "The Queen" (2006, Stephen Frears). ♦ Sept. 30 at noon: "Mafioso" (1962, Alberto Lattuada; in Italian). ♦ Sept. 30 at 3 and Oct. 1 at 6: "The Go Master" (2006, Tian Zhuangzhuang; in Mandarin). ♦ Sept. 30 at 6 and Oct. 1 at 9: "Woman on the Beach" (2006, Hong Sang-soo; in Korean). ♦ Sept. 30 at 9 and Oct. 1 at 2:30: "Little Children" (2006, Todd Field). ♦ Oct. 1 at noon: "August Days" (2006, Marc Recha; in Catalan). ♦ Oct. 2 at 6 and Oct. 3 at 9: "Bamako" (2006, Abderrahmane Sissako; in French and Bambara). ♦ Oct. 2 at 9 and Oct. 3 at 6: "Gardens in Autumn" (2006, Otar Iosseliani; in French).

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—In première. Sept. 28 and Sept. 30 at 9: "Pusher 3: I'm the Angel of Death" (2005, Nicolas Winding Refn; in Serbo-Croatian). ♦ Sept. 29 at 7: "Tomorrow Always Comes" (2006, Jacob Burckhardt and Royston Scott).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Sept. 29-30: "Ramones: End of the Century" (2003, Jim Fields and Michael Gramaglia).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—"Thalia Film Classics." Oct. 1 and Oct. 3 at 5: "Breathless" (1960, Jean-Luc Godard; in French). ♦ "Thalia Film Currents." Oct. 1 and Oct. 3 at 7: "An Inconvenient Truth" (2006, Davis Guggenheim).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Palestinian films. Sept. 27 at 6: "Wedding in Galilee" (1987, Michel Khleifi; in Arabic, Hebrew, and Turkish). ♦ Sept. 27 at 9: "Chronicle of a Disappearance" (†). ♦ Sept. 28 at 8:45: "Paradise Now" (2005, Hany Abu-Assad; in Arabic). ♦ "50 Years of Janus Films," a New York Film Festival sidebar. Sept. 30 at 1 and Oct. 2 at 4: "Jules and Jim" (1962, François Truffaut; in French). ♦ Sept. 30 at 3, Oct. 2 at 2, and Oct. 3 at 5:30: "The Seventh Seal" (1957, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish). ♦ Sept. 30 at 8: "The Rules of the Game" (1939, Jean Renoir; in French). ♦ Oct. 1 at 1 and Oct. 3 at 2: "Children of Paradise" (1945, Marcel Carné; in French). ♦ Oct. 1 at 4:30: "Beauty and the Beast" (1946, Jean Cocteau; in French). ♦ Oct. 1 at 6:30 and Oct. 2 at 8:30: "Knife in the Water" (†). ♦ Oct. 3 at 7:30: "Monika" (1953, Bergman; in Swedish). ♦ Oct. 3 at 9:30: "WR: Mysteries of the Organism" (1971, Dušan Makavejev; in Serbo-Croatian).

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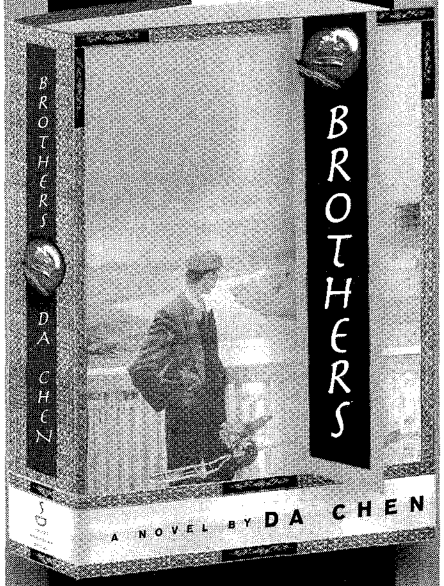

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"Part Greek myth, part *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights,* and all China, Da Chen's new novel is intoxicating. A thrill."
—BENJAMIN CHEEVER, author of *The Good Nanny*

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READINGS AND TALKS

THE GREAT HALL

The London Review of Books recently published an essay on the influence of pro-Israel lobbyists on U.S. foreign policy, and on Sept. 28 at 7 it presents a public debate on the subject. John Mearsheimer, who wrote the article with Stephen Walt, will join Martin Indyk, the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy; Tony Judt, a professor of European studies at New York University; Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies and director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University; Dennis Ross, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; and others. (Cooper Union, 7 E. 7th St. 212-279-4200.)

NATIONAL ARTS CLUB

Jennifer Gilmore reads from her début novel, "Golden Country," and Binnie Kirshenbaum previews her forthcoming novel, "Greater Than Love." (15 Gramercy Park S. No tickets necessary. Sept. 28 at 7.)

"HOMAGE TO MAXINE HONG KINGSTON"

The Asian American Writers' Workshop, which is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary, along with the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University and the National Book Foundation, pays tribute to Kingston with an afternoon of discussions with noted academics and writers focussing on her memoir "The Woman Warrior," which was first published thirty years ago. (Kimmel Center, 60 Washington Sq. S. Sept. 29, starting at 1. For more information and details about related events, call 212-494-0061.)

JILL KREMENTZ

The photographer presents a slide show of images from "The Writer's Desk 2007," her literary desk diary. Mary Karr, Kurt Vonnegut, and other writers portrayed in the book will be on hand. (Barnes & Noble, Broadway at 66th St. No tickets necessary. Sept. 29 at 7.)

THE SLIPPER ROOM

The online literary humor magazine *Opium* celebrates the release of its third print issue with readings by its editors, Elizabeth Koch and Todd Zuniga, the comedian Jack Kukoda, the novelist Josip Novakovich, the *New Yorker* editor Ben Greenman, and others. (167 Orchard St. Tickets at the door. Sept. 30 at 8.)

"WELCOME TO DOOMSDAY"

Bill Moyers expounds on his essay about the right wing, the Rapture, and environmentalism, which appeared last year in *The New York Review of Books* and was recently published as a paperback book. With the writer Bill McKibben, who provided the introduction to the book. (Celeste Bartos Forum, New York Public Library, Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. 212-930-0571. Oct. 3 at 7.)

"THE SUBWAY CHRONICLES"

Boris Fishman, Elise Juska, and Amy Holman read from their contributions to the new anthology of tales from New York City's underground. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary. Oct. 3 at 7.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"PRELUDE '06"

This annual festival offers a free look at the upcoming downtown theatre season. The four-day event features more than twenty performances by the likes of Will Eno, Charles Mee, Carl Hancock Rux, Cynthia Hopkins, and Mabou Mines. (Martin E. Segal Theatre, City University of New York Graduate Center, Fifth Ave. at 34th St. Sept. 27-30. For more information, visit web.gc.cuny.edu/mestc.)

"HERE WAS NEW YORK"

The Brooklyn Historical Society and the Brooklyn Arts Council are marking the fifth anniversary of 9/11 with this multi-location photography exhibition, subtitled "Twin Towers in Memorial Images." Pictures of the World Trade Center's legacy, including photographs of its rendition on everything from wall murals to tattoos, are on view at galleries throughout the borough through the end of the month. (For more information, call 718-222-4111, ext. 225.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Christie's takes a breather, with a lighthearted two-day sale of (comparatively) affordable prints and multiples (Sept. 26-27), featuring old friends like Miró, Picasso, and Lichtenstein, and a not-so-terrifying rendition of Hell by Ed Ruscha. The outspread wings of a bronze eagle grace a sixteenth-century Flemish lectern that once stood in Hearst Castle in San Simeon, one of the star lots in an auction of European furniture, sculpture, and works of art (Sept. 28), which is followed by one of the house's periodic House Sales of furniture and decorative art works (Oct. 3-4). (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ Several Brussels tapestries, including one from the workshop of Jos de Vos that depicts Alexander the Great at the battle of the Granicus River, are on offer at **Sotheby's** first auction after a week's break, a selection of Continental furniture (Oct. 3). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Doyle** offers Belle Époque artifacts at its Sept. 27 sale, among them a Lalique molded-glass chandelier, an American Aesthetic Movement faux-bamboo chest of drawers, and a gorgeous silver Tiffany Japanesque pocket flask decorated with ornate dragonfly motifs. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.)

Tom Stoppard's trilogy, "The Coast of Utopia."

ANDREA VENTURA

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
RAISING HELLMAN

Oct. 12-17

In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the director Monte Hellman worked with Jack Nicholson, Warren Oates, and other charismatic outsiders to raise routine action films to the level of existential struggle. BAM presents a week of Hellman's works, including "The Shooting," "China 9, Liberty 37," and "Two-Lane Blacktop," from 1971, which co-stars Oates, James Taylor, and Dennis Wilson, of the Beach Boys. (718-636-4100.)

READINGS AND TALKS
BIG DOGS

Oct. 12-14

In 1996, the poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady founded the Cave Canem Foundation (the name, taken from a sign at Pompeii, is Latin for "Beware of Dog"), an organization devoted to the support and promotion of African-American poetry. They join Elizabeth Alexander, Lucille Clifton, Sonia Sanchez, and other writers at the City University of New York's Graduate Center to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the foundation. (www.cavecanempoets.org.)

THE THEATRE
COAST LINES

Oct. 17

Lincoln Center Theatre mounts a production of "The Coast of Utopia," Tom Stoppard's epic three-part drama about nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals. "Part One: Voyage" stars Ethan Hawke, Billy Crudup, Martha Plimpton, Amy Irving, and many others. (212-239-6200.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
THE ZORN ZONE

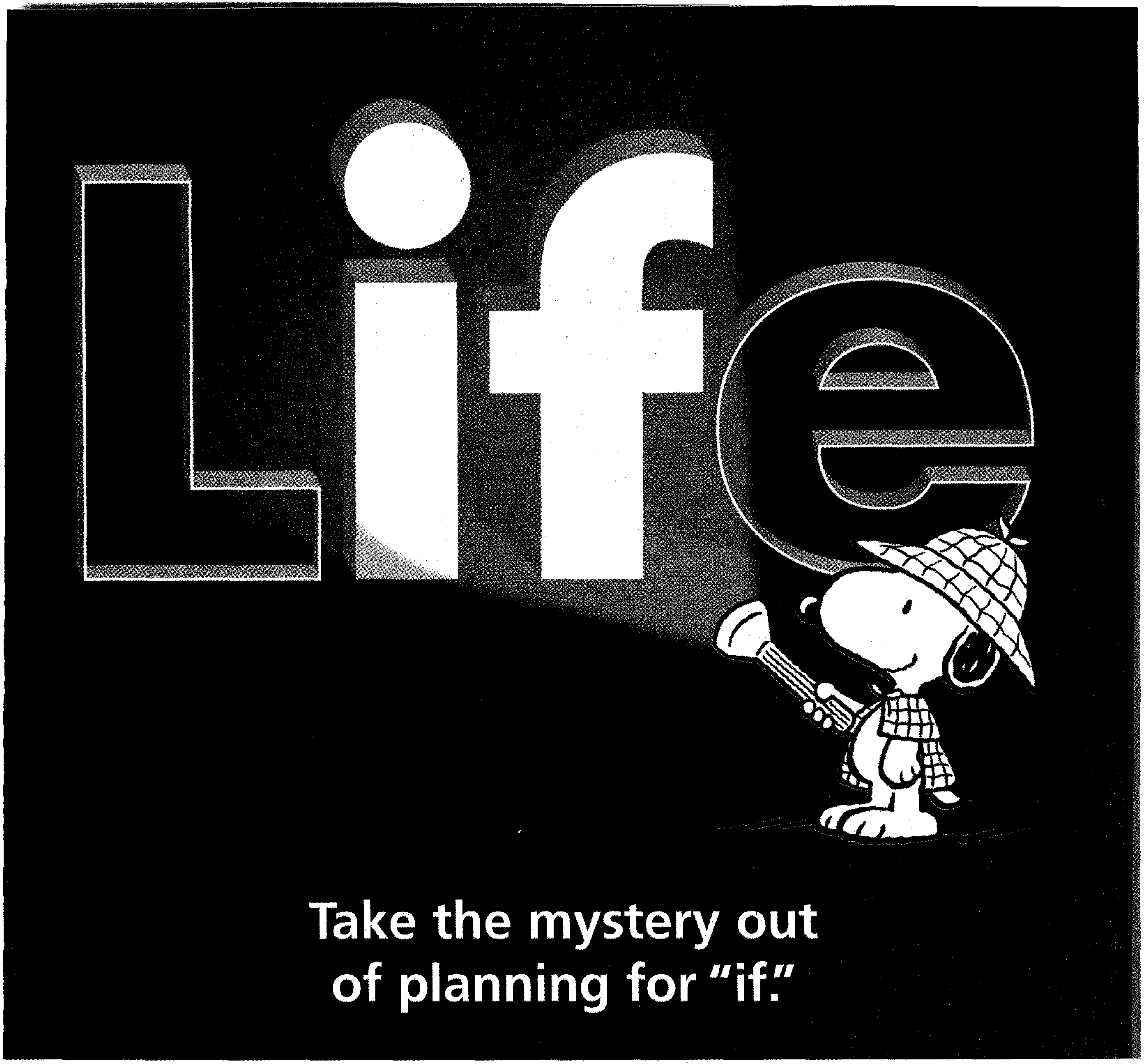
Oct. 26

John Zorn, a virtuoso composer of wildly eclectic but deeply spiritual music—and a recent recipient of a MacArthur grant—is the subject of a tribute at Columbia University's Miller Theatre that will feature four world-première works. (212-854-7799.)

ART
BACK TO SCHOOL

Oct. 29

P.S. 1 opens five new shows, including an Arctic-themed architectural intervention by Katrín Sigurdardóttir and a retrospective of the work of the British artist John Latham. (718-784-2084.)



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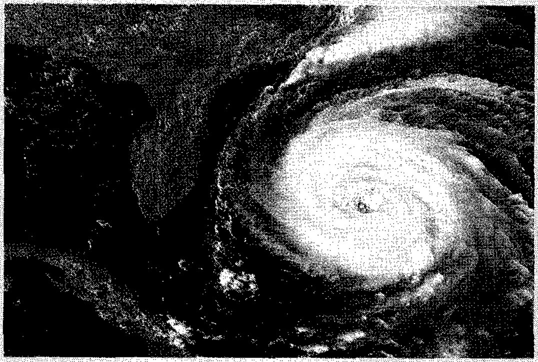

HOMELAND SECURITY IS STRENGTHENING OUR NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN BORDERS. UNFORTUNATELY, THE BIGGEST THREAT WE FACE MAY ATTACK FROM THE EAST.

Last year, a record number of hurricanes formed in the Atlantic basin. This wasn't just bad luck. There's actually a scientific reason behind it: The Atlantic Ocean has become warmer than average. Scientists say this temperature cycle could bring us more devastating hurricanes for at least the next decade. As of 2004, the property value in the 18 East and Gulf Coast states totaled $6.9 trillion. That's over half the entire U.S. GDP.

We can't afford to leave ourselves exposed like this any longer.

Today, Congress is working with state and local officials and the private sector to create a financially responsible solution to prepare and protect Americans from future natural catastrophes like hurricanes and earthquakes. H.R. 4366 and S. 3117 use insurance premiums — not tax dollars — to create a financial backstop against disaster and help Americans better prepare themselves for these events. It is truly a cause worthy of your and every American's support.

IT'S TIME TO STRENGTHEN OUR DEFENSES.

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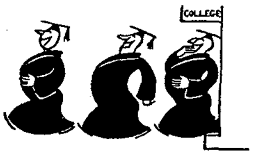
THE
NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
TOP OF THE CLASS



The competition to get into, or get one's kids into, the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities is unmatched for cutthroat ferocity. But it is echoed, however faintly, in the jousting among Ivy League administrators to be at the forefront of enlightened academic and social policy. A couple of weeks ago, Harvard announced that it was suspending its early-admissions program. A few days later, Princeton scrapped its program entirely. Although most schools aren't likely to follow that lead any time soon, it has sparked another round of welcome debate within academe about the need to reform college admissions.

Derek Bok, Harvard's interim president, offered a succinct rationale for the change. Early-admissions programs, he said, "tend to advantage the advantaged," because "students from more sophisticated backgrounds and affluent high schools often apply early to increase their chances of admission, while minority students and students from rural areas, other countries, and high schools with fewer resources miss out." He's right, of course, and dropping early admissions will eliminate one of the more blatant manifestations of what might be called reverse affirmative action. But it's not as big a step as it may appear, because it leaves in place preferences for what admissions officers refer to as "legacies" and "development cases."

Élite universities will never be perfect meritocracies, and no one expects them to be. But neither do they wish to perpetuate America's class system, which in some ways is becoming more ossified than ever. Yet, according to the Century Foundation, only three per cent of students at the hundred and forty-six most competitive colleges come from families whose levels of education, jobs, and income put them in the bottom socioeconomic quarter. Seventy-four per cent come from the top quarter. More startling, recruitment of minority and low-income students actually fell in recent years. In response, some colleges—including Harvard and Princeton and some of the most influential small liberal-arts colleges—now offer substantial subsidies to freshmen whose parents earn less than a middle-class income, and these schools are also working harder to seek out such candidates.

Nevertheless, the most selective colleges are still overly generous to applicants from the kinds of family least in need of a leg up in life. Legacies, the children of alumni and alumnae, have long had an easier time getting in. On top of that are the development cases—the term of art for the often less than academically stellar children of celebrities, wealthy executives, and influential politicians. As Daniel Golden, a reporter at the *Wall Street Journal*, explains in his new book "The Price of Admission," Ivy League college presidents, admissions deans, and trustees spend a great deal of time and effort soliciting these lucky students, many of whom are admitted with S.A.T. scores three or four hundred points below those of some rejected applicants.

A related problem is the scramble for the best students—and, indirectly, the best slots in *U.S. News & World Report's* annual rankings. This "arms race" has led colleges and policymakers to

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

award increasing proportions of aid based on "merit" rather than on financial need. Thus a status-hungry school will lure a gifted student from a higher-ranked competitor by offering the kid full room, board, and tuition, even if his or her parents can afford the fees. As a result, children from middle-class families are actually more likely to receive grants and tuition discounts from private institutions—and more money—than those from low-income families. Even students from families in the top quarter of wage-earners are nearly as likely to receive aid as those in the bottom quarter.

Colleges no longer talk about racial preferences, which remain wildly unpopular ("diversity" is the word of choice), but there is no comparable public resistance to economic preferences. According to the Century Foundation, almost two-thirds of Americans support policies that reward academic achievement in the face of economic and social hardship.

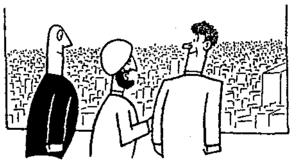
Defenders of the legacy-and-development approach point out that if letting in a slightly less worthy kid ultimately brings in a million bucks, many more bright students from poor families can get scholarships. There's something to that argument (though it overlooks the tendency of big givers to earmark their donations for buildings, institutes, and endowed chairs bearing their names). And it's certainly not the colleges' fault that the financing of education for the less well-off, like so much else these days, is being increasingly left to the vagaries of the private sector.

Congress is even more beholden than academe to its wealthiest contributors, and more willing to compromise the principles—like equal opportunity—that its members claim to cherish. The value of Pell grants, which help low-income students pay for college, continues to drop precipitately as the price of higher education rises. (It now costs more than forty thousand dollars a year to go to a selective private college, and about fifteen thousand a year for an in-state student to attend a public college. Last year, the largest Pell grants were only four thousand and fifty dollars.) The most recent federal budget signed by President Bush slashed tuition assistance by almost thirteen billion dollars. Meanwhile, state legislatures have heavily cut their subsidies to state universities, and, whatever college you choose, figuring out how to piece together which grants, loans, and scholarships are available practically requires an advanced degree in calculus. All of this has had a predictable effect: a new report by a committee advising Congress and the Department of Education reveals that, during the current decade, up to two and a half million qualified students, stricken by the costs of higher education, either will be forced to drop out or won't enroll at all.

At a meeting of minority journalists in 2004, President Bush—a Yale graduate, like his father and his grandfather—agreed that admissions "ought to be based on merit" and, when pressed, added that legacies should be abolished. Two years before, his niece Lauren had been admitted to Yale and to Princeton, where she enrolled, despite applying a month after the deadline, and with an inferior academic record. Daniel Golden reports that the dean of admissions at that time accepted her because he was "looking to inject personalities not from the liberal élite." But injecting personalities from any élite misses the point. Instead, colleges and legislators at every level, across the country, need to find better ways to admit qualified students who show the initiative and the ability, against the odds, to become productive, influential citizens. That would be a real legacy.

—*Dorothy Wickenden*

DEPT. OF GRIDLOCK
WONK WEEK



So many dignitaries, so little time. At MOMA last Wednesday night, a money manager whose wife had just given birth to their first son held a glass of white wine, surveyed the throngs, and said, "I need to spend more time in Davos, so I can recognize these people." He was at the opening-night party for the Clinton Global Initiative, which coincided (by design) with the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, bringing every politico, pundit, despot, philanthropist, First Lady, and diplomat of note to town for a whirlwind few days of posturing, glad-handing, do-gooding, and future-plotting. On the museum's second floor, the money manager, while eating short ribs, met a deeply tanned Friend of Bill, a trial lawyer with slicked-back hair and a private jet (on which, he said, the former President has ridden several times). "I don't know that there'll ever be another asbestos," the lawyer said, assessing the future in his own resigned way.

Such is pretty much the routine at the city's annual wonk week, when midtown hotel lobbies and East Side restaurants swell with international eminences (Argentines at Nello's, Congolese at the Waldorf), and the social order, for a brief moment, is realigned. Jalal Talabani snubs Woody Allen at Circo and is applauded anyway. Alyssa Milano stands ignored at the Sheraton while, nearby, the space-tourism entrepreneur Richard Branson is trailed by groupies. One veteran conventioneer, having just spent an afternoon at a panel with Warren Buffett, Barbra Streisand, John Glenn, and Shimon Peres, regarded the experience with a kind of weariness. "I feel the same way about classical music," he said. "Six months later, I'll look back and decide it was interesting."

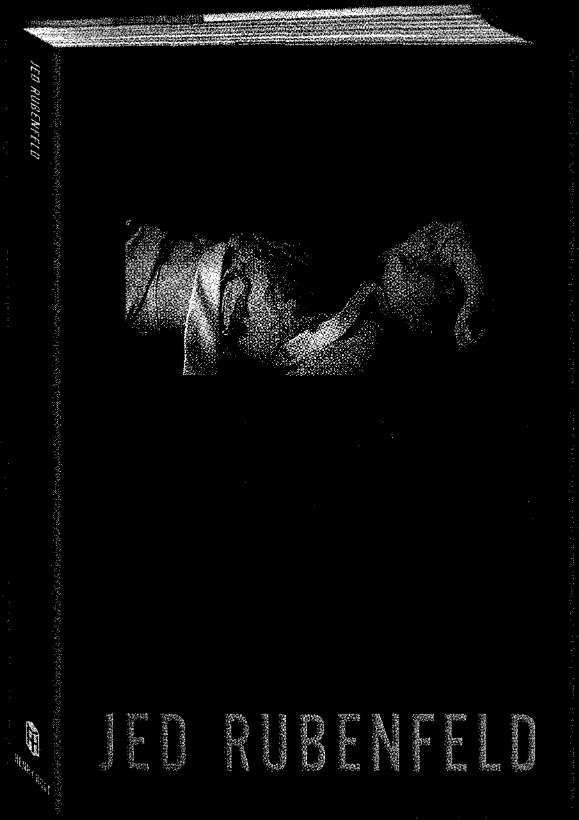
And yet only in the most weirdly thrilling of weeks could the smug Holocaust denials of the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have receded from memory so quickly, upstaged by the antics of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who stood at the General Assembly Hall

SOME CRIMES DEFY ANALYSIS

A spellbinding historical thriller –

Sigmund Freud pursues a diabolical killer from the elegant salons of old New York to the darkest labyrinths of the human mind.

Photo: Raquel Jaramillo



THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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—*Entertainment Weekly*, a "Must Read"

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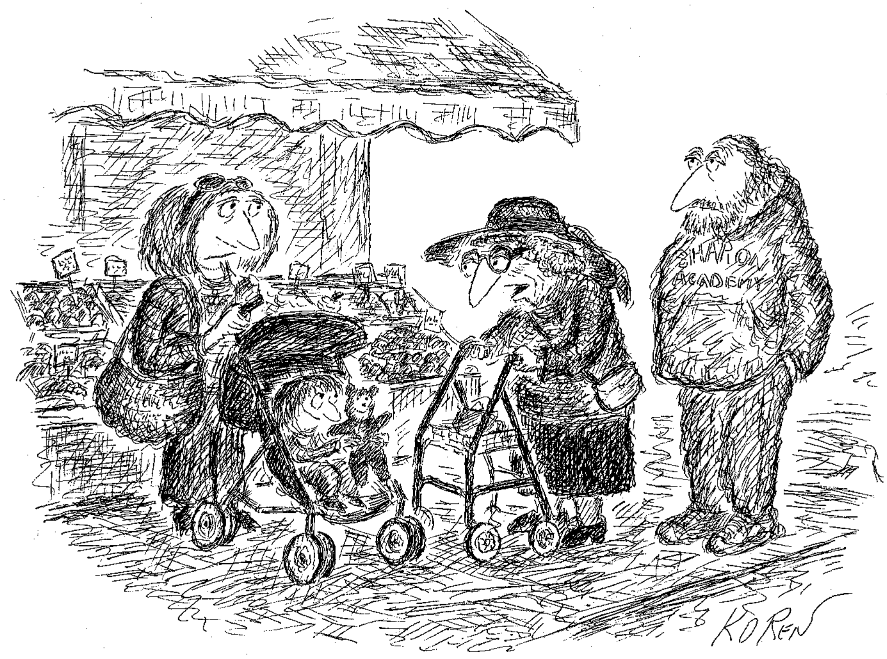


"I just hope that when your mother is as old as I am you'll be able to help her figure out Medicare Part D."

• •

lectern, waving a copy of Chomsky's "Hegemony or Survival" and complaining about the lingering smell of sulfur in the air. Neither man was content to preen for U.N. delegates alone. Ahmadinejad decamped to the Barclay Intercontinental on Wednesday evening, for a meeting with the Council on Foreign Relations, and the following night he hosted a party at the Hilton. Chávez, meanwhile, channelled Castro circa 1960, appearing triumphantly in Harlem, dressed in symbolic red, with Danny Glover at his side, offering Venezuelan oil to America's urban poor.

To focus entirely on the rascals, however, was to miss the minor delights (Al Gore in his shiny cowboy boots) and the happier star turns, such as that by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who made a sniffling, coughing Hamid Karzai laugh (with hoary witticisms like "It is better to jaw-jaw rather than war-war") at a C.G.I. panel on managing diversity in the globalized world. Tutu, when asked to comment on the Pope-Muslim rift, replied, "It shows how very difficult it is to say sorry. I find it difficult to say sorry to my wife in the privacy of my bedroom."

Karzai, undaunted by his apparent cold, stopped by the Council for lunch on Thursday. When the floor was opened for questions, a woman in the back stood to introduce herself. "I'm a reporter from *Glamour* magazine," she said.

Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International*, who was moderating (there and everywhere else, it seemed), interrupted. "She's going to ask you about that cloak, Mr. President," he said, referring to the emerald-green shawl Karzai had worn onstage with Archbishop Tutu.

"Let's see—I hope," Karzai said, looking almost relieved. But in fact the reporter wished to discuss the situation of women in Afghanistan.

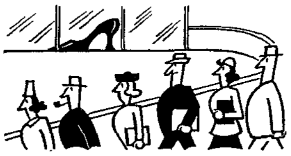
Late in the week, word spread, as if from one Phish fan to another, that Columbia University, whose World Leaders Forum plays fourth fiddle to the U.N., the C.G.I., and the C.F.R., had invited Ahmadinejad to speak on Friday: an encore performance, unplugged. That visit never came to pass, and so headlining duties fell to another rebel. He was Evo Morales, the President of Bolivia, who abandoned the colorful striped sweater he'd worn on trips to Spain, China, and South Africa, earlier in the year, for a more solemn look: slacks and a leather jacket.

"For me, it's a great joy and satisfaction to be here in the United States," Morales said at Columbia, through a translator. "The former U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia, Manuel Rocha, called me a bin Laden, a Taliban." Morales, a former coca farmer, offered no comments about the comportment of his close friend Chávez, but he did mention that he was starting "a campaign for the dignification of the coca leaf." He received a standing ovation. "I'm a little bit nervous, because I have to leave here in a couple of minutes," he said. "The Embassy of the United States in my country gave me a very short-term visa."

The same could presumably be said of Chávez and Ahmadinejad, whose name most New Yorkers were no closer to pronouncing correctly by the end of the week.

—Ben McGrath

CHAMPAGNE TASTES DEPT.
STILETTO HEIST



Next time you're eating at 60 Thompson and you happen to spot someone wearing white Habitual jeans, humming along to the new Madonna song, paying for his meal with a two-hundred-dollar gift certificate, and hobbling around on four-inch metallic-striped wedges that may be several sizes too small, call 911. There's no cash reward, but you stand to reap untold bounty in luxury footwear. You may have helped to nab the stiletto bandit, a thief who has eluded N.Y.P.D. detectives since burgling the garment-district showroom of the French cobbler Christian Louboutin.

"He kicked through the wall," Shawna Rose, Louboutin's public-relations director, said the other day, pointing to a large, jagged crater just to the left of the office's front door. "When I got off the elevator, I saw piles and piles of drywall and fibreglass. The door was wide open. My first thought, even though it wasn't logical, was water damage." The date was June 26th, a Monday morning. Rose went through the door, only to come upon a scene out of an especially hellacious sample sale. Shoeboxes and lids askew. Tissue paper everywhere. Lefts without rights strewn across the room, their trademark scarlet soles upturned like pools of blood in a Brian De Palma movie.

The robber, Rose realized, had selected his quarry with a finicky precision equally reminiscent of the Zodiac Killer and Diana Vreeland. In addition to stealing various things that were lying around the office—Rose's white jeans, the restaurant voucher, "only my best CDs," petty cash, computers—he also carefully picked through hundreds of pairs of shoes, rejecting the most lavish styles for those of a more avant-garde sensibility. European 38s and 40s were the preferred sizes. "Whoever did this was very particular," Rose said. (The rigor of the thief's aesthetic seems to have been lost on the police, who, according to Detective Dennis Laffin, noted in a report that "unknown individual forced their way into location" and "removed between twenty to forty boxes of shoes of a high-end quality." The report recorded that the incident occurred at "Christian Jourdutin," conjuring a Canal Street knockoff of the famous label.)

"The python bags?" Rose said. "Didn't touch them." She gestured toward a rack of mink-trimmed boots and snakeskin satchels, which retail for almost four thousand dollars apiece. "He didn't take, say, any of the pony-skin shoes. He did pluck here and there from the fall line."

"Did he get Sirene?" Jasmine Ross, Rose's assistant, chimed in from her desk. (Yes, and before anyone else could. The shoe, a round-toed ostrich pump with a thick high heel, wasn't yet in stores at the time of the break-in.)

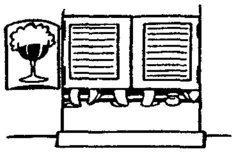
"We were, like, *this* shoe?" Rose went on. "Why not this lizard-trimmed peep-toe? Or even this, just sitting out"—she held up a patent-leather spike heel with leopard trim and a satin bow—"the classic Louboutin, the collector's shoe?" The thief also ignored a wall of single-shoe prototypes, which the designer had been working on for the Spring/Summer 2007 collection. "That would have been really dangerous for us," Rose said, relieved that the evidence pointed away from footwear-industry espionage.

Still, the prevailing hypothesis is that the bandit was some sort of connoisseur. For one thing, Rose said, "he took a lot of archive stuff, weirdly." Moreover, he took six pairs of a model called Fred, a brown leather lace-up jazz shoe. "People who love Fred are tastemakers, stylists, Europeans," she said. "Maybe it was a disgruntled fashion person with a crack habit—no, crystal meth! Maybe he was out at the Chelsea clubs and said, 'Let's go get some shoes,' and wore them to the after-party."

Another shoe that particularly captured the robber's fancy was a diagonal-striped leather wedge. A "mid-range" model, costing six hundred and ninety-five dollars, it's one of Rose's favorites and requires, she says, a progressive mind-set. As her assistant put it, "You have to *get* the shoe, you have to *get* the stripes." It comes in red or white patent leather with black stripes, and is called Sing Sing.

—*Lauren Collins*

SECOND GENERATION DEPT.
HIP FOR HIM



Pete's Candy Store, the popular Williamsburg bar, opened at 4 P.M., an hour early, for a church service one recent Sunday. Pete's is known for its retro-chic entertainment—bingo, spelling bees, neo-vaudeville—but this was its first sermon, just as it was the first sermon that Pastor Jay Bakker, of the Revolution Church, had given since leaving his congregation, in Atlanta, to start a new branch in Brooklyn. "I enjoy hanging out in bars," Bakker said. "I've been sober for almost eleven years now, but there's just something about a bar."

The thirty-year-old preacher pulled a stool onto a small, theatrically lit stage and opened a Bible to Romans 3:20. "For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands," he read. "For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it." Like many new residents of Williamsburg, Bakker looked as though he belonged nowhere else. The cuffs of his dark-blue Diesel jeans were rolled up precisely three inches. His T-shirt—a cigarette-smoking skull wearing an aviator's helmet, beneath the words "It's only a matter of time"—was both ominous and obscure. Intricate tattoos covered both his arms. His boyish face was framed by chunky black Ray-Bans and topped with a gray Izod cap. His lip appeared to be stapled.

From the stage, he spoke conversationally, with a pleasant Southern accent. "The vision of Revolution has always been to love people and care about people and just be friends with people," he said. He talked a little about visiting his mother, Tammy Faye Bakker Messner, who is dying of cancer in a hospice. "I feel it's really important for me to share my inner life with you. I want to be transparent. Because, growing up in the church, I never saw a lot of transparency." He went on, "I felt guilty all the time. I thought God hated me. And for a while I didn't want anything to do with him. And now I know God loves me. He's crazy about me." As if sensing that he was approaching a dangerous level of earnestness, Bakker reached quickly for a self-mocking, doofus voice: "Jesus is really quite fond of me." And then the voice of Sally Field: "He *likes* me! He really *likes* me!"

The twelve young men and women who had come to Pete's to hear Bakker's sermon were evangelicals, Episcopalians, and Catholics, and they came from Williamsburg, Lefferts Gardens, Morningside Heights, and the Bronx. Several said they had been listening to his "punk rock" services via podcast. They were looking for a progressive, non-judgmental church. "What really sucks about church is that it's so early on Sunday morning, so I like that this is four in the afternoon," one woman said. "Neither of us is drinking," her companion noted, "but it's nice to have the option."

In the front room, where Pete's regulars *were* drinking, the reaction to Bakker was one of tolerant skepticism. "It's nice that he's focussing on God's love, but I think it's going to be difficult to convert the hipsters," one man said.

After the service was over, Bakker sat outside on a stoop and talked about how he got to New York. "Two years ago, my wife and I came to visit, and our friends brought us to Williamsburg. Everyone is, like, 'Williamsburg, hipsters, blah-blah-blah.' What I like about it is that the buildings are low." He warily eyed a high-rise under construction a few blocks west. "For now. Till those go up."

He lit an American Spirit cigarette. "It was hard leaving the church in Atlanta, but I was glad to do it because I wanted to see my wife's dreams fulfilled." Amanda Bakker has just started medical school at N.Y.U. "I think it worked out perfect. I love the city. I got to go to a car show, the Rumblers car show under the bridge over there"—he gestured toward the B.Q.E. "My favorite band is Social Distortion—they're playing four times this month, and I'm going twice. I love that about the city. I love to be able to walk down the road, go get a bagel, hang out at the coffee shop. There's a part of me that feels like I should have moved here a long time ago."

His phone vibrated. "Hey, Mom!" he answered. "I'm doing O.K., I just got done with the first service. . . . It was really cool. . . . Yeah, a lot of really great people. . . . Well, thank you. How are you feeling today? . . . Yeah, I know." He laughed at some private joke. "Just make it an adventure. . . . I love you, too, Mama. All right, bye."

—*Daniel Radosh*

IN THE ACADEMY
SHORTCHANGED

In August, two Princeton economists released a study titled "Stature and Status: Height, Ability, and Labor Market Outcomes." The aim of the paper, by Anne Case and Christina Paxson, was to attempt to explain why tall people generally earn more than short people. The question is not a new one. More than a hundred years ago, social scientists established the correlation between height and socioeconomic status, and they've been trying to solve the enigma of what has been called the "height premium" ever since. In 1915, a study found bishops to be taller than preachers and sales managers to be taller than salesmen. A 1968 paper identified peer perception as a cause of the earning discrepancy. Separate studies in 1993 and 2006 concluded that discrimination is a key factor. Case and Paxson's work presents another explanation: On average, taller people earn more because they are smarter.

The study was published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a nonpartisan think tank in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During the paper's first week on the N.B.E.R.'s Web site, it was downloaded by a handful of academics and government types. The authors received e-mails from fellow-economists who sent brief accolades such as "This is great" and "Fascinating" and "I didn't know this" and "WOW"—the resonant pings of quiet kudos in academe.

A week later, Reuters published a story on the paper under the headline "TALLER PEOPLE ARE SMARTER—STUDY." Within days, Case and Paxson had received dozens and dozens of e-mails from outraged readers. "I have no idea if it was the fact that women had written the study, but half of the ones I got were from short men," Case said the other day. "Some of them were actually obscene." Most of the e-mails were hostile: "Shame on you!" scolded one man (4' 9"). "I find your hypothesis insulting, prejudicial, inflammatory and bigoted," said another (5' 6"). "You have loaded a gun and pointed it at the vertically challenged man's head" (no height given). "I want to thank you and your colleague for perpetuating the crusade against short people" (5' 6"). "On a personal note it was very nice to be reminded that I really am a loser and will never be held in 'high' esteem by society" (5' 4"). "LEAVE THIS ALONE YOU'RE NOT HELPING ANYBODY," another read.

The Reuters article ran at three hundred and sixty-three words (the study was fifty-one pages) and simplified the connection that the economists had drawn between height and intelligence. Paxson and Case, who specialize in children's health, theorize that if children experience optimal health and nutrition they will fulfill the maximum height and intelligence of their genetic destiny. In other words, a person genetically programmed to be six feet four who reaches only six feet two because of poor nutrition is not necessarily smarter than someone who with optimal nutrition has reached his full height potential of five feet four.

"We both felt genuinely distressed," Paxson said of the reaction. "A lot of people were concerned with how tall I was"—she is five feet nine and Case is five-eight. "The idea that we would have written it any differently had we been five feet two is frustrating." She went on, "It's sort of like if you're driving and somebody thinks you did something wrong and they give you the finger. You know you didn't do anything wrong, but you also feel, like, how could they *think* that of me?"

Several of the angry e-mailers struck a defensive note, including details such as I.Q. scores and Mensa memberships. "I am successful and easily the most intelligent person of my peers; both socially and professionally" (5' 6"). One mother announced, "I have a son who graduated from Harvard and Harvard Law School. He is short and rich and very very smart."

Among the accusations of discrimination, there was also pathos: "I have had to deal with bullies all my life, since first grade, and I encounter them even now (I am 61)," wrote one man. "I'm 5' 6", but I'm not subhuman," another said. Some writers simply wanted the scientists to know that the study hadn't shaken their faith in short people. Great short people in history were enumerated—Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Aristotle Onassis, Prince. The most upbeat message came from the tallest correspondent: "I realize that men my height, 6' 11", are statistical anomalies, but I'm curious to know if your findings suggest that a seven-footer would be exponentially smarter and thereby wealthier than a six-footer or even a five-footer?"

—*Mark Borden*

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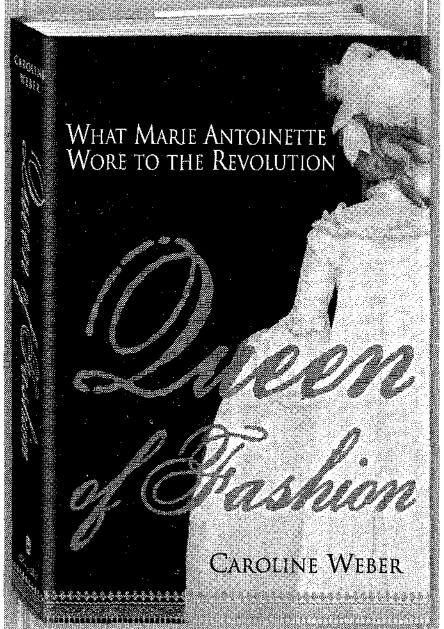

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NOTES OF A GASTRONOME

TV DINNERS

The rise of food television.

BY BILL BUFORD

The first sign that I'd been unknowingly affected by cooking shows occurred on a Sunday morning when I realized I was talking to myself. I'd been making toast. "First, we cut our bread," I whispered. "Do you know why?" I stopped what I was doing and looked up. "Let me tell you why." It was eight-thirty. It was also Hour 25 of a seventy-two-hour commitment I'd made to watch continuous food television (sleeping only when the shows began repeating at midnight).

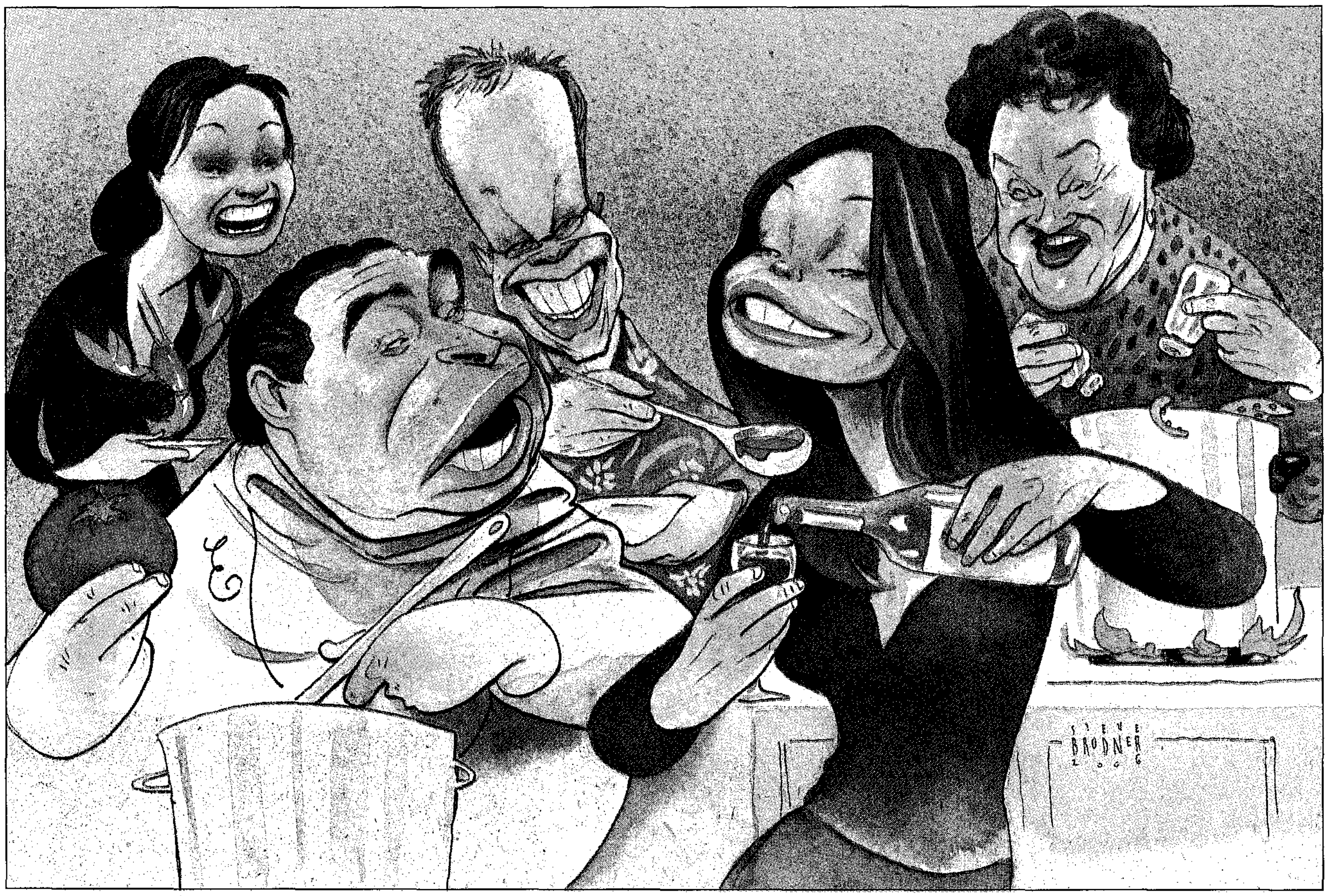
I'd begun the venture on a lark, curious about what I'd discover. This, for instance, is what I had learned about the hazelnut: "They grow on hazel trees. . . . They're super-duper rich." That was from the Food Network's "Everyday Italian," with Giada De Laurentiis. (The following week, on a show hosted by Sandra Lee, I heard, "Do you know when the first cheesecake was ever documented as being eaten or served? It was in 776, or 776 *B.C.*, by the Greeks at the Olympics. Isn't that pretty cool? Say *that* at a dinner party and everyone's going to think you're brilliant and well read.") I don't want to sound harsh—this wasn't the History Channel—but, on the evidence, there was a surprisingly strong affinity between preparing food and talking baby talk.

At around Hour 36, a more illuminating sign occurred. It was during a rerun of Bobby Flay's "Throwdown." Flay is a veteran food-television personality. "Throwdown" is his seventh show, and it involves Flay's challenging old hands at their game: making Jamaican jerk chicken with a jerk-chicken diva, say, or taking on Cindy the Chili Queen, whose Cin Chili clearly rocks. Flay is then usually humiliated, and the old hand—Butch the pit master, say, with his secret spice rub—gets pumped beyond reason, the little-guy view of the world is vindicated, and everyone feels good. I set out to prepare some supper, and as I removed a loaf of bread from a paper bag I was struck by an unexpected sound: the dry, crisp noise of the bag being disturbed. I'd never noticed this before. It was loud and crinkly: so utterly *brown paper*. I shrugged (was it a lack of humidity?) and proceeded to dress a salad, in a bowl next to a candle. I cut up a lemon and squeezed a slice. The fruit, crushed in front of the flickering light, was magically transformed. I squeezed again: juice beaded up and fell in a stream of bright droplets. I squeezed one more time, enjoying what I now regarded as a citrusy translucence, a candle by lemon light. "Veeeeeery pretty!" I said to no one, feeling sixteen and having a late-night-munchies perception moment. I'd been brainwashed, in a fashion, my senses heightened by this long, uninterrupted session of food television. It wasn't an unpleasant state (apart from the consequences for my salad, now inedible).

I had fallen victim to what is called, by its detractors, "food porn." Its creators usually refer to it as "making beauties"—as in "Hey, Al, let's do a beauty of those pecans." Bob Tuschman, the Food Network's head of programming, had described the concept when I visited him in his office, above the Chelsea Market, in Manhattan. The point is to get very close to what you are filming, so close that you can see an ingredient's "pores" ("You should believe the dish is in your living room"), which then triggers some kind of Neanderthal reflex. "If you're flicking from channel to channel and come upon food that has been shot in this way, you will be hardwired as a human being to stop, look, and bring it back to your cave."

Earlier in the week, I'd watched that same Al—Al Liguori—film some of those beauty pecans at one of the Food Network's studios. Al worked the jib—a high-powered camera at the end of a twelve-foot arm. The pecans, surrounded by five spotlights, were resting on a bent piece of Plexiglas, for a hundred-per-cent reflection (pecans both in a bowl and somehow below it, like mountains on a placid lake), while Al inched closer and closer ("getting tight"). He then manipulated a knob so that some nuts were in focus, while the ones behind, backlit, receded into an arty blur.

Al has shot a lot of food. ("More diced onions than anyone on the planet.") He is thirty-six and has been behind a food camera for ten years. I'd watched him before, during a taping of "Emeril Live," starring Emeril Lagasse, the portly Portuguese baker from Fall River, Massachusetts, who was probably more naturally an evangelist than a natural chef and, after years at the Commander's Palace, in New Orleans, had been born again as a Creole kitchen crooner. Lagasse was the first to discover that cooking before a bleachers crowd, primed to respond raucously to theatrical additions of garlic or chili flakes or bacon ("Let's take it up a notch!"), can make for inexplicably compelling television. "The trick," Al had told me, "is to film during the lunch hour and get closeups of the audience—they're crazy with hunger."



The changing face of food TV: Giada De Laurentiis, Emeril Lagasse, Alton Brown, Rachael Ray, and Julia Child.

STEVE BRODNER

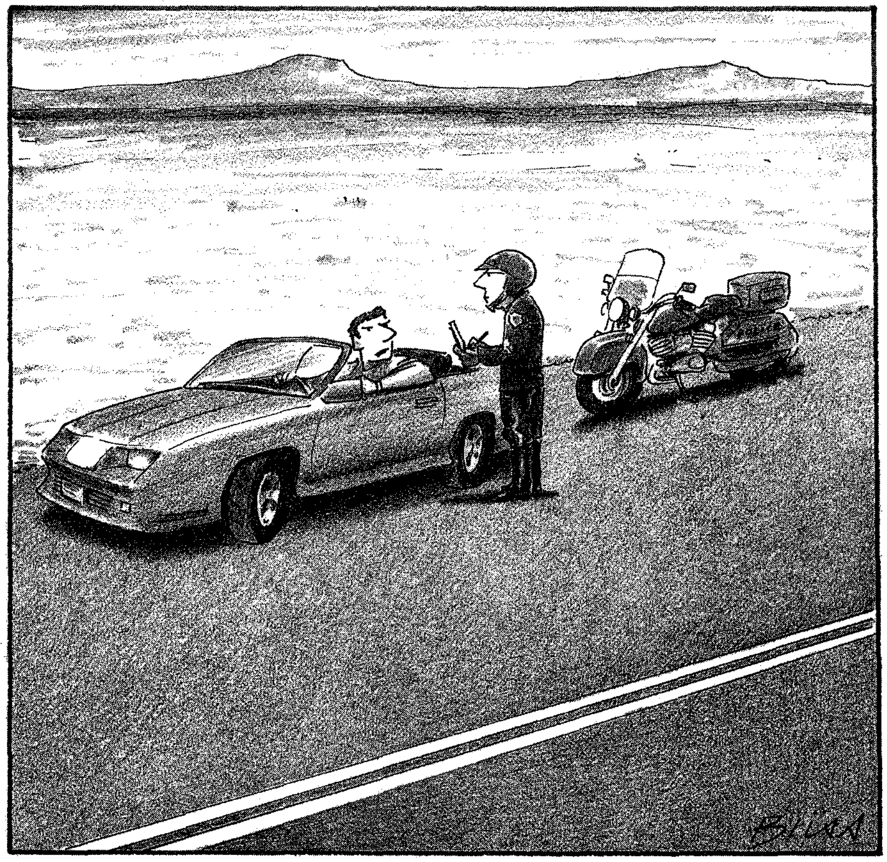
After the pecans, Al shot a cup of milk being measured out. This required three takes and was followed by a "sound pass"—same event, but with a microphone close up to get the acoustic ripples. They would be amplified and edited back into the final version. Milk as waterfall.

"You should talk to Hugh," Al said, pointing to a burly man with a handheld camera. "Hugh Walsh is the beauty specialist."

Hugh was filming a carrot. The carrot, the pecans, and the acoustically amped milk were for "Party Line," a new show hosted by Dan Smith and Steve McDonagh, winners of last year's search on "The Next Food Network Star." ("Ten thousand tried! Only two succeeded!") "We are a gay couple," they'd announced on their audition video, "and you should really think about that, because the gays right now, they're hot." They are from Chicago—actors who started a catering business—with a low-wattage repartee (on dirty dishes: "We have people for that. We call him Dan") and an anachronistic, almost blithely oblivious aesthetic: their meals seem like something someone's parents once ate, a campy "Joy of Cooking," or a display at a MOMA exhibit. The set was Grosse Pointe, 1960: brown sofa, brown chairs, a brown chest of drawers with round knobs, a throw rug, a linoleum floor; you could imagine a black-and-white television in the corner and the Kennedy-Nixon debate. Today, Dan and Steve were making a "veggie basket" (perfect with "a smoky ranch dip"). I knew nothing about veggie baskets, but there was instruction: a number (less than six veggies, too "skimpy"; more than twelve, too much), a technique (blanch your beans, then ice them, so the green pops), and a commitment to visual novelty (yellow carrots, purple peppers, rainbow greens). Putting the basket together took all afternoon, and there were many retakes.

During a break, I asked Hugh what he'd been doing with his camera. It had always been moving (if I hadn't been studying it, I wouldn't have noticed): a barely perceptible pan, a slow circle, a gentle back-and-forth.

Hugh was an unlikely beauty special-



"Do I know how fast I was going? Isn't that your job?"

ist: a laconic fifty-one, with what looked like a war reporter's battered face, a man who seemed to know the world and didn't much care for it. "They're frontals," Hugh said, gesturing to the two hosts. "Frontals don't do much. They stand. I'm trying to get movement." He paused. He seemed unaccustomed to speech. "It's not like the old days."

In America, the old days probably began on a February morning in 1962, when Julia Child, having been asked to promote "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" on a book show on WGBH, the Boston public TV station, phoned ahead, asking for a hot plate and permission to involve the show's host, P. Albert Duhamel, a Boston College professor, in a demonstration. The professor couldn't cook, and, on live television, Child was going to teach him how to make an omelette—a brazen flourish for a novice food writer. Russell Morash, at WGBH, remembers the call, because Child was so unusually well spoken and patrician in manner. It was as though he'd picked up the phone and found Eleanor Roosevelt on the other end. Child was a "hoot," according to one of the twenty-seven viewers who contacted the station afterward—enough for it to find funding to prepare a three-episode pilot that would eventually become "The French Chef."

Morash was asked to be Child's director, because he was the only one qualified to do the job: he knew nothing about food, but he could operate the station's mobile unit, a 1958 Trailways bus converted to a control center on wheels. The network didn't have a kitchen—one had been found at the Cambridge Electric Company (a stove, no working sink)—and the show was effectively treated as a live event. Child had to cope with electric shocks ("We could never get that mike grounded"), and, because the cameras were like refrigerators, too heavy and cumbersome to maneuver, ceiling mirrors were used to shoot what she was doing on the stove. ("Julia would stir, we'd cut to the mirror, and suddenly she was stirring in the other direction—we all got confused.") The comic moments (some possibly apocryphal) beloved of fans of the early episodes—Child dropping her knives, flipping a pan full of potatoes that then go flying in the air, letting a chicken slip through her fingers and fall onto the floor ("You're alone in the kitchen, who is going to see?")—were the result of there never being a chance for a retake or a fix. "To edit," Morash told me, "you had to find the spot on the film, cut it out with a razor blade, and tape it back together."

There had been earlier television cooks—James Beard's "I Love to Cook," Dione Lucas's "To the Queen's Taste"—but they were "experts," something Child never seemed to be, mainly because what she knew had been learned so recently and so late in life. Child's culinary education began after she had moved to Paris, at the age of thirty-six, accompanying her husband, Paul Child, a State Department official, and found herself attending the Cordon Bleu. She ended up mastering the national menu, starting a cooking school, and returning to the States with a bulky rough draft that would change the American kitchen. She never lost that new cook's sense of discovery.

For all the obvious production shortcomings, the show was unlike anything else on television. "You have to remember the early sixties," Morash recalled. "Broadcasting was a medium of mayhem. Assassinations, war, riots. You turned on your set, that's what you saw. But if you changed the channel you could watch a soufflé being made." Child, too, was unlike anything else on television: six-feet-two, virtually hunchbacked, seeming too ungainly for a small screen, with a long, manly face, but one that was also remarkable for its intelligent expressiveness. In it you could see her making connections, finding wonder in the properties of egg whites or the behavior of gelatine, a wonder that was at the heart of what now seems like a natural pedagogical imperative. She made people want to cook, often inspiring them with a single detail. To make one of those famous omelettes, for instance (WGBH produces a compilation DVD), Child recommends an extremely hot pan. Nobody knew that. The omelette is then distinguished by a duplex texture—

slightly crusty on the outside (because the pan is so hot), custardy in the middle (because you flip it before it's cooked through). "No one made omelettes then," Morash said. "No one used garlic, except the Italians in the North End. Few people went to restaurants—only rich people, and the restaurants were formal and fussy. People cooked, everyone did, because you had to eat, but it was meat and potatoes. Even fish was exotic. It had a Friday stigma."

Cable made the Food Network possible. It was invented in 1993 by Reese Schoenfeld, a co-founder of CNN, who was convinced that its natural audience was women—millions of them. According to Jonathan Lynne, who was the head of development, "Those were fat days—everyone getting great jobs, making dough—which created an affluent television demographic that saw food as culture."

From the outset, the network had hoped to make a different kind of food television, Lynne told me. "What people knew at the time was Julia Child. She was a great woman, but it was your grandmother's cooking." She was, in Lynne's view, symptomatic of a PBS how-to approach, a non-TV TV that was all about the information: it was meant to be good for you. "My objective was to make it more entertaining," Lynne said. This was not a tall order; it was a towering one.

The network had, in Lynne's description, "a lot of product to get out"—in fact, eighteen hours of product to get out every single day—and, apart from Emeril Lagasse, the loud, abrasive Everyman ("Hey! Look at me! Christ, if *I* can do this, you can, too!"), there weren't many obvious food talents looking for work. Lynne ended up using "Chef du Jour," a daily show, with a new chef every week—electric stove, and no instruction except a hope that something good might happen—as a covert audition, and had some modest success. (Actually, it's remarkable how many of the show's discoveries—Sara Moulton, Bobby Flay, Mario Batali, and Tyler Florence among them—are still on television today.) "Chefs have credibility," Lynne said. "I'd always assumed we'd build the network around them." But there were still many hours to fill, and the impression that Lynne conveys is of a production office in way over its head: frantic, even desperate, audition videos stacked in the corners, people watching two, three, sometimes four televisions at once, hoping to come up with enough programming to fill Schoenfeld's brief, the kitchen equivalent of CNN, broadcasting food twenty-four hours a day. In the event, good television was made, but so, too, was much that was not so good (lessons in fixing gourmet dishes for your dog). The formula, whatever it was, wasn't working. If food was the new cultural interest, the network hadn't figured out how to present it with conviction. By 1997, the network was in only fifteen million households. Within four years, Lynne had quit, Schoenfeld had quit, and almost every other investor had sold out. "There was no direction, and way too many people running it," according to Ken Lowe, then in charge of E. W. Scripps's modest cable-networks division. In 1996, Lowe's predecessor instructed Scripps to sell its interest, an investment of eleven million dollars. Then, less than a year later, Lowe appeared before the board with a proposal: maybe Scripps should buy that Food Network back again—an even larger stake and for a lot more money (a hundred and twenty million dollars).

"Ken, what are you asking us to do?" Lowe told me a board member had said. "We've just sold our piece low and now you want to buy it back high? What's wrong with this picture?" But Lowe got his network back, and brought in Judy Girard to help run it. (Previous experience: Lifetime, a women's cable channel.)

Girard became president in 2001. When I met her, the following year, she was fifty-six, with blond hair, a slight build, an easy manner, and nothing to hide; frank but not theatrical, calm to the point of seeming tranquillized, no flash or fast-talking speech about "a vision thing," which I now suspect was because her job had been so simply defined: make the bottom line work. She wasn't interested in James Beard Awards or good reviews; the only press that mattered was in the financial pages, because her allegiance was unwaveringly to "her community"—the investors. The day we met, Girard had received a viewers' survey. The network was now in seventy-five million households and its audience was among the most affluent people watching television in America. "And nearly half of our viewers are men," Girard said. This was a different audience from the one conceived by Schoenfeld, and rather elusive to picture: I found myself imagining stock traders and dot-com millionaires at home all day, kneading dough, trying out new recipes, wondering what to do with saffron.

How did Girard explain the success?

"Television values. That's all. We introduced television values and started running the business like a normal network."

My seventy-two-hour vigil ended on Monday at midnight, with Rachael Ray's "$40 a Day" (go to a city, eat a lot, spend a little, tip cautiously), the fourth Rachael Ray show I'd watched in ten hours. Rachael Ray is probably the most watched kitchen personality in the history of American television. She is available in other guises, too—in a magazine (*Every Day with Rachael Ray*), as a guide ("Rachael Ray's Tasty Travels"), and as a morning talk-show host—but her core achievement is "30 Minute Meals," built on the conceit that anyone should be able to cook dinner in the time it takes to watch an episode.

Ray—a likable sales-rep personality, with a me-and-my-mom vocabulary and a smile as instantaneous as a light switch—had been a buyer for Cowan & Lobel, a fancy food store in Albany (previous experience: the candy counter at Macy's), and had come up with thirty-minute evening cooking classes to help move goods during the holiday season. The classes were popular; she wrote a booklet to accompany them, later picked up by a small publisher, and was promoting it on an Albany call-in show when a media consultant, hearing her on his car radio, called Bob Tuschman, who signed her up. Ray was exactly what he had been looking for.

At the time, Tuschman had been in charge of the daytime programs (previous experience: "Good Morning America" and an earlier film credit, "In the Beginning God Created the Swimsuit"), which, like the rest of the network's shows, were being assessed according to Girard's "television values" and found wanting. Some of these values included a commitment to higher production standards, and, as a consequence, the shows made now are full of exacting, intimate, amplified, and exaggerated beauties. (It's not erotic, I can confirm—that's not why it's called food porn. It's just unreal. You will never meet a Playmate of the Month; you will never eat the red, juicy tomato that you see on "Barefoot Contessa.") But the main problem was the "talent." The network had got "too chef-heavy," Girard had told me, when we spoke again by phone. Chefs tend to do one kind of show—the scorned how-to, or "dump-and-stir," as the network executives call it. "You need television talents. You can't run a network with chefs," Girard said, so authoritatively and matter-of-factly that I found myself agreeing with her. (Of course not! Who wants to watch a wizened old chef!)

Giada De Laurentiis, of "Everyday Italian," is not a chef, although she has culinary expertise—she was trained at the Cordon Bleu and worked as a private cook for a wealthy Los Angeles family. She is also the granddaughter of a famous filmmaker, grew up in Beverly Hills, and is lithe and young and pretty, a prettiness that no Food Network executive is going to allow her to hide behind an apron. (She is probably the only kitchen person with a diaphanous dress sense, occasionally looking as though she'd just come from bed or was about to return to it.) She has, in effect, replaced the forty-six-year-old Mario Batali: after a decade on the Food Network, "Molto Mario" is not being renewed. Sara Moulton is a chef, and one of the few people knowledgeable enough to field live phone-in queries, the basis of her show. But she, too, has been judged not to be a television talent and, after nine years, has been replaced—by Rachael Ray. "It's a conscious move," Anthony Bourdain lamented when I spoke to him. "The Food Network is weeding out the Old Guard real-chef cooking shows like missing Molotovs—'Molto Mario,' Sara Moulton."

What quality does Ray have that, say, one of the Molotovs doesn't? It is probably more apparent in the early broadcasts. A series on perfect burgers filmed during Ray's first year (the Food Network has done two hundred and fourteen shows on how to make a hamburger) includes a characteristic menu: a "no-muss-and-no-fuss" salad, like coleslaw (Ray has thirteen slaw recipes), followed by some meat dish—during my extended viewing, these tended to include bacon and blue cheese (Ray has eighteen blue-cheese recipes, among them a blue-cheese spaghetti, with a sauce, probably unique in the history of pasta, made from bacon fat, butter, olive oil, chicken stock, and cream swirled together, smothered with blue cheese, and then sprinkled with bacon bits: an intensely flavored creation, even if a little alarming to look at—a viscous dull yellow). On this occasion, many of the ingredients, typically, had been prepared at the supermarket and included sealed bags of pre-sliced cabbage, to facilitate getting everything done before the thirty-minute deadline. The coleslaw would be dressed with soy sauce ("It's kinda like balsamic vinegar is to red-wine vinegar—it's a little bit thicker"), but not before Ray had turned on a burner to heat an oven-top grill: this was for her "awesome" turkey patties ("Yummy!"). Heating the oven-top grill beforehand was a tip. So, too, was the use of a garbage bowl—kept on the counter to save trips to the trash—for vegetable trimmings. In fact, the garbage-bowl tip was offered three times. In between, you heard about Ray's mom ("She watches news a lot—maybe too much") and her baby brother, who had just turned twenty-seven ("which is just not possible"). There was also her dog, her dad, a theory about cabbage and cancer, some giggles—an effortless patter that, for all its lack of weight, was not without a goofy charm.

Today, the patter is no longer so obviously aimless, although Ray still believes that having a garbage bowl, now referred to as a "G.B.," is a good tip—good enough to repeat it on every show, sometimes twice. "Yummy" is "Yum-o" (a branding "trademark" expression; among Ray's kitchen products is a "Yum-o" T-shirt), "delicious" has become "delish," and her ingredients are often personified, addressed in some form of the third-person butch: a red pepper is a "buddy," meatballs are "guys," a sandwich is "Sammy." "What makes Rachael Ray so exciting to people," Tuschman told me, "is that she speaks their language, shops at the same places they shop, and uses the same ingredients." Ray wants to be just like us.

The two essential premises of "30 Minute Meals"—no one knows how to cook and everyone is in a hurry—now inform most instructional cooking shows. If you have time to watch a Saturday morning of the Food Network, you will learn that you have time for nothing else. There's urgency even in the names—"Good Food Fast," "Quick Fix Meals," "Semi-Homemade Cooking," "Easy Entertaining," "Good Deal"—and a reassuring friendliness in the ingredients, which, like Rachael's, so uniformly come out of the fridge sealed in plastic wrap that it is impossible not to suspect an executive order. You don't have to know how to cook, just how to shop; and everyone knows how to shop. The appeal of squash is that it's a limited time investment, Robin Miller says on "Quick Fix Meals," illustrating how to prepare one in under fifteen minutes. Sandra Lee recommends pre-peeled carrots—the ones sold by Dole. (Who has the time to peel carrots?) In the supermarket, you can get your melon already cut up—it's over there by the salad bar. Near the meat section, Dave Lieberman tells us on "Good Deal," you can buy an already cooked rotisserie chicken. (Who knows how to cook one, anyway?)

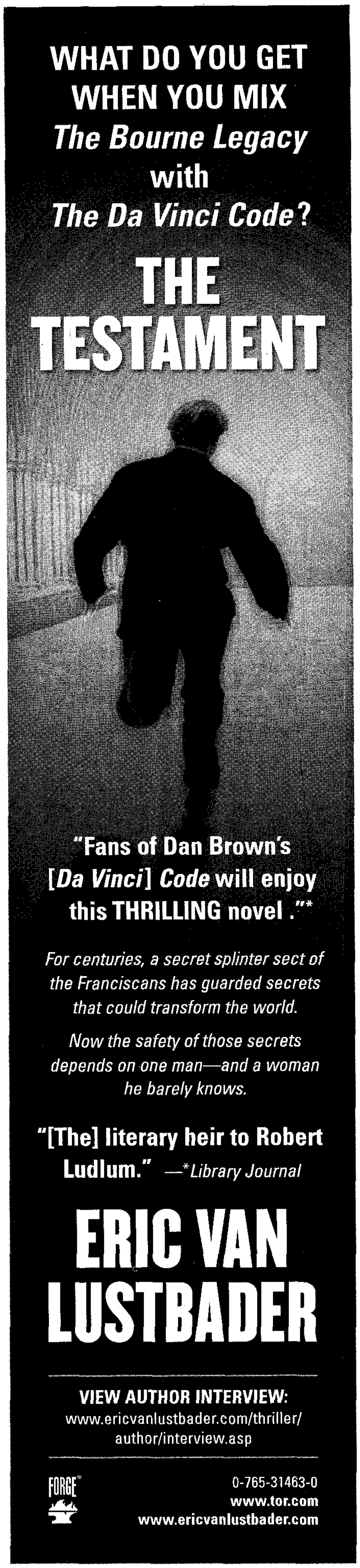
I found myself taking stock not of what I'd seen during the preceding seventy-two hours but of what I hadn't. I couldn't recall very many potatoes with dirt on them, or beets with ragged greens, or carrots with soil in their creases, or pieces of meat remotely reminiscent of the animals they were butchered from—hardly anything, it seemed, from the planet Earth. There were hamburgers and bacon, but scarcely any other red animal tissue except skirt steak, probably, it occurs to me now, because of its two unique qualities: its texture and its name. It cooks fast (two minutes on each side, according to Rachael Ray—less, according to Robin Miller), and it sounds like something you might pick up at the Gap.

Forty-five years after the publication of "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," food television is finally and definitively not Julia Child. But the result divides viewers, sometimes quite passionately, into those who have always regarded Child as a good thing and those who may never have heard of her (or what most Food Network executives describe as food élitists and the rest of the country). Although the detractors, including Bourdain, are a vocal bunch—there is a Web site called the Rachael Ray Sucks Community—the Food Network executives are unfazed. They have nothing to defend, and you guys, you just don't get it.

Judy Girard left the Food Network in 2003. Her work was done (the channel—worth billions, according to Lowe—was in eighty million households, although their average income had fallen a bit, to a still fairly affluent seventy-five thousand dollars), and she moved to Nashville: Scripps had bought a shopping cable network, and Girard was going to develop it into a Shop at Home venture featuring celebrities from the Food Network and other Scripps stations. Her legacy, she explained when I spoke with her, included Rachael Ray, Giada, Alton Brown, and Sandra Lee, "brands," whom viewers would now go out of their way to watch and follow—in effect, do anything to be closer to. Now Girard would put them on her new network, selling. At a quarterly meeting that Scripps holds for investors, the project was described in more detail. At the end of the year, a house would be given away as a prize, its kitchen filled with the actual utensils that food celebrities use and that their fans will want to buy. It would be promoted every day: Rachael would offer her knives; Emeril, Viking stoves. According to Joe Necastro, the C.F.O. of Scripps, Girard was perfectly placed for this experiment in "marketing synergy." "She knows the talent—she'll do the contracts."

But the synergy venture failed (in July, Scripps sold Shop at Home), and its failure seems telling. For all their swagger and expertise, Girard and her successors may not be that different from anyone else who has tried to run the Food Network, basically a goodhearted organization still fundamentally clueless about itself (TV or non-TV?) and its audience (cooks or kitchen idiots?), more professionally run than ever before, but still throwing a lot of product out there, a motley up-and-down mess, filling up the hours, hoping something is going to work, loyal, above all else, to its community, the shareholders. In thirteen years, and with several changes of ownership and management, its essential premise is unchanged. People have always liked to watch others prepare food—a social activity fundamental to the human race—and the network's programming has depicted little else: the happy narrative of the raw to the cooked, the oldest story line in history. The network's rare intellectual show (Alton Brown's wacky lessons in the science of the kitchen, an admirable, exceptional effort; his program on the skirt steak actually tells you where the meat comes from, because Brown illustrates it on his own body while in a pasture among cows) and its most eccentrically entertaining ("Iron Chef," pitting one kitchen against another as though cooking were an Olympic event) still resemble "30 Minute Meals" more than they resemble anything else on television: you finish with something to eat.

Ours is a different audience from the one that watched Julia Child. In 1962, "microwave oven" and "fast food" hadn't entered the national lexicon. And restaurants were more expensive. Tim Zagat, the publisher of Zagat Guides, points out that for more than two decades the cost of going to restaurants or getting takeout has risen less than the annual rate of inflation—that it's much less expensive today than at any other moment in our history to pay other people to prepare our dinner. Never in our history as a species have we been so ignorant about our food. And it is revealing about our culture that, in the face of such widespread ignorance about a human being's most essential function—the ability to feed itself—there is now a network broadcasting into ninety million American homes, entertaining people with shows about making coleslaw. ◆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CASUAL

PINCHUCK'S LAW

BY WOODY ALLEN

Twenty years in the homicide division of the N.Y.P.D. and, brother, you've seen everything. Like when some Wall Street broker juliennes his little petit four over who gets to work the channel changer, or this lovesick rabbi decides to end it all by salting his beard with anthrax and inhaling. That's why when someone reported a dead body on Riverside Drive at Eighty-third with no bullet holes, no stab wounds, and no signs of struggle I didn't freak to some film-noir conclusion but put it down to one of the thousand natural shocks the Bard claims the flesh is heir to but don't ask me which one.

When another stiff turned up in SoHo two days later, though, also without the least trace of foul play, and a third likewise in Central Park, I got out the Dexedrine and told the immortal beloved I'd be working late for a while.

"It's amazing," my partner Mike Sweeney said as he strung the usual yellow bunting around the crime scene. Mike is a bear of a man who could easily pass for a bear, and has in fact been contacted by zoos to fill in when the real bear was ill. "The tabloids are saying it's a serial killer. Naturally, the serial killers are claiming bias and that they're always the first ones accused when three or more victims are killed the same way. They'd like the number raised to six."

"I'll level with you, Mike, I've never seen anything like this one—and you know I'm the guy who collared the Astrology Killer." The Astrology Killer was a vicious maniac who liked to sneak up and bash people's heads in while they were yodelling. He was tough to nab because there was so much sympathy for him.

I told Mike to call me if he came up with any sexy clues and I beat it down to the morgue to ask Sam Dogstatter, our coroner, about poison. Sam and I go way back to when he was a young coroner starting out and used to perform autopsies at weddings and sweet sixteens, for cigarette money.

"At first I thought it might be a tiny dart," Sam said. "I tried to check out everybody in New York City who owned a blow gun, but the task was insurmountable. No one realizes half the town's got one of those six-foot Jívaro jobs and most citizens have carrying permits."

I brought up the possibility of the Amanita mushroom, which can kill without leaving any trace, but Lou shot it down. "There was only one health-food store that sold really deadly mushrooms, but it stopped years ago when it turned out they weren't organically grown."

I thanked Sam and put in a call to Lou Watson, who was excited because he'd gotten a very good set of fingerprints at the crime scene, which he instantly traded to another precinct for a rare set of Enrico Caruso's that were quite valuable. Lou said the lab had come up with a hair. They had also come up with a bald spot. The hair unfortunately matched an eight-year-old kid's and the bald spot was traced to a row of nine men in the front row of a girlie show, who all had airtight alibis.

Down at headquarters, I chatted with Ben Rogers, my mentor and the man who solved the Yuppie Restaurant Murder Case, where the victims were shot and then lightly dusted with lime and fresh mint. Ben had waited till the killer ran out of fresh mint and was forced to use chopped walnuts, which were traceable by their serial numbers.

"Tell me about the victims," I said. "Did they have any enemies?"

"Sure, they had enemies," Ben said, "but their enemies were all at Mar-A-Lago, in Palm Beach. There was a big Enemies Convention and practically every enemy on the East Coast attended."

I had just left Ben to grab a sandwich when I got word that a hot-off-the-griddle stiff had turned up in a Dumpster on East Seventy-second Street. This time the pristine corpse was Ricky Weems, a young actor who specialized in sensitive rebels and was the star of the TV medical soap opera "When a Mole Darkens." Only this time a homeless lady caught the action. Wanda Bushkin, who'd once slept every night in a carton on the Lower East Side, had recently moved to a carton on Park Avenue. At first, she worried that she wouldn't get board approval, but when her net worth was shown to be above four dollars and thirty cents she was accepted at the more desirable box.

Bushkin couldn't sleep on the night in question, and caught sight of a man who drove up in a red Hummer, tossed a body, and sped away. At first, she didn't want to get involved because she had once identified a criminal who then broke off his engagement to her. This time, she described the suspect to our sketch artist, Howard Inchcape, but Inchcape, in a fit of temperament, refused to do the picture unless the suspect would come in and sit for it.

I was trying to reason with Inchcape when my mind suddenly twigged on B.J. Sygmnd, the psychic. Sygmnd was a poor Austrian who'd lost all the vowels in his name in a boating accident. In 1993, I had used Sygmnd to find a cat burglar, whom he rather miraculously picked out from almost a hundred strays. I watched now while he poked around at the victim's belongings and then went into some kind of trance. His eyeballs widened and he started to speak but the voice that came from him was that of Toshiro Mifune. He said the man I was looking for employed Novocain and worked with drills on molars and bicuspids, and he might even be able to pinpoint the profession but he needed a Ouija board.

A quick computer check corroborated that all the victims were patients of the same D.D.S., and I knew I'd hit pay dirt. Anesthetizing myself with four fingers of Johnnie Walker, I used a Swiss Army knife to pry out the silver amalgam in lower seven, and the next morning sat openmouthed while Dr. Paul W. Pinchuck worked on my cavity.

"This won't take long," he said. "Although if you have a little time I should also do the tooth next to it. I'm surprised it hasn't given you any trouble. You're not missing anything outside today, anyhow. Can you believe this weather? April set a record for rainfall. It's this global-warming thing. Because too many people use air-conditioners. I don't need

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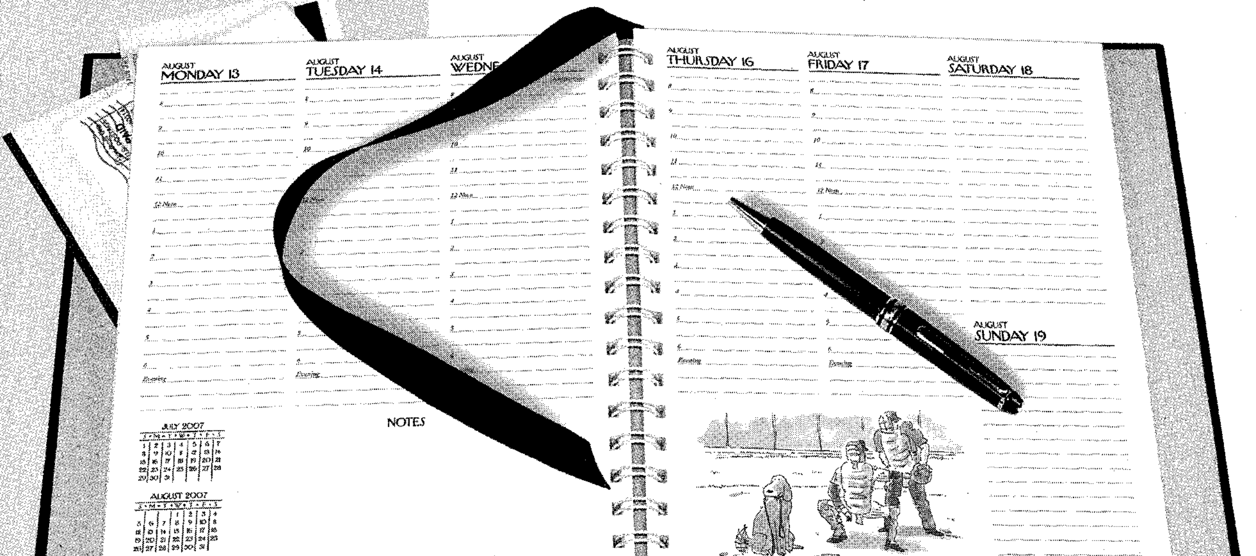
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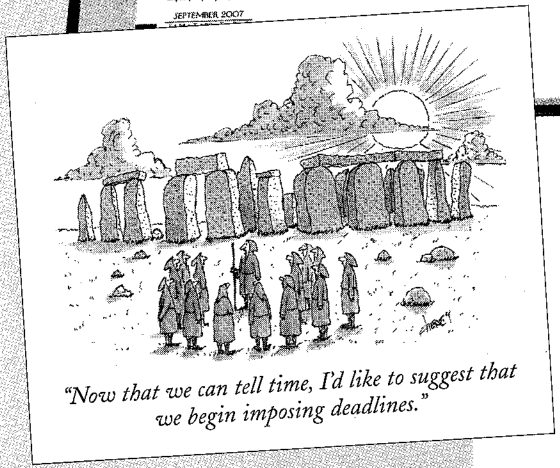
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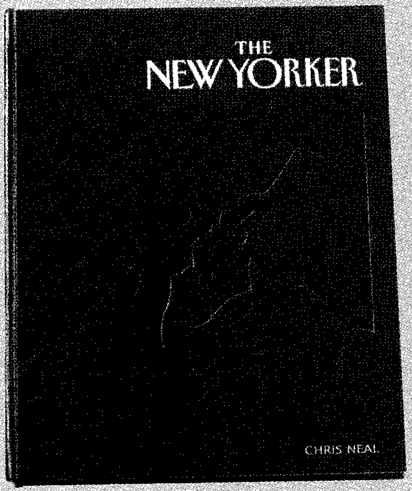
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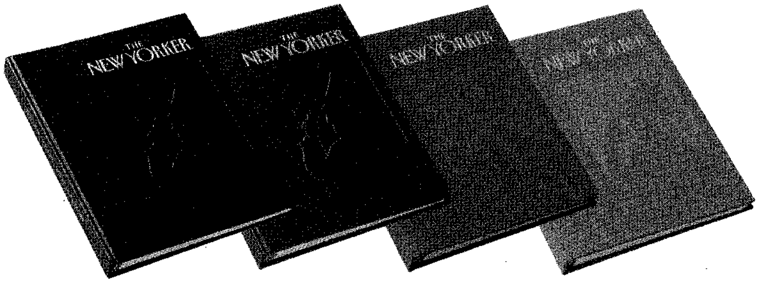
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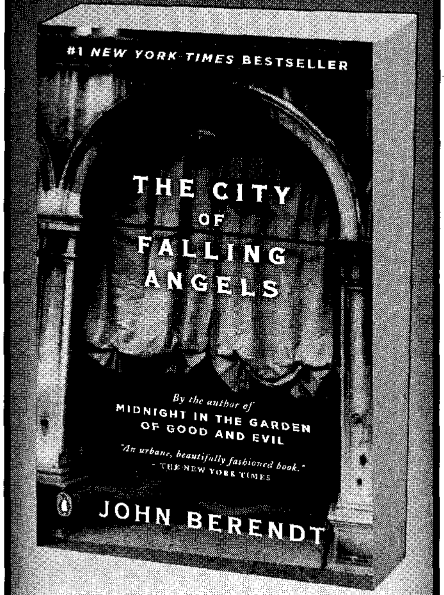
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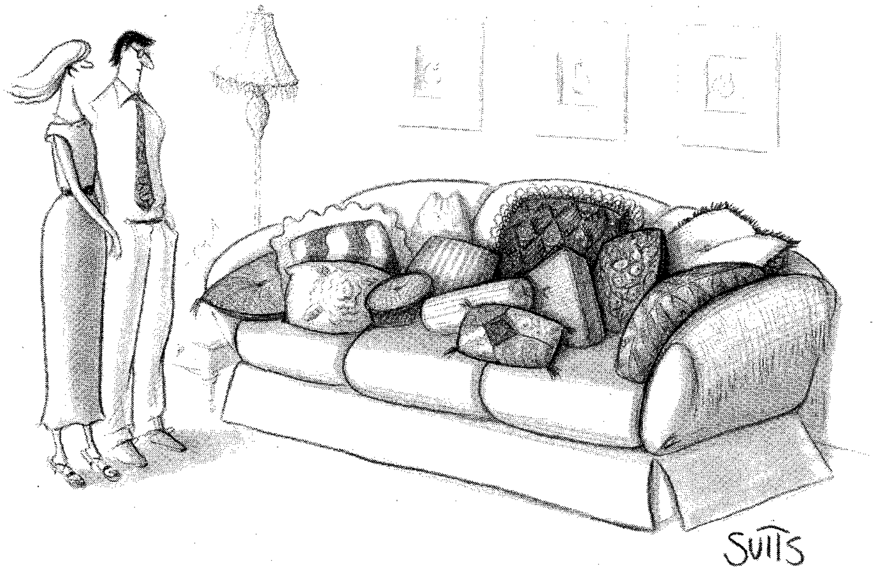


"I'd like you to meet my pillows."

• •

one. Where we live you sleep with the window open even in the hottest weather. I have a good metabolism that way. My wife, too. Both our bodies adjust well. Because we're very careful about what we eat. No marbleized meat, not too much dairy—plus I exercise. I prefer the treadmill. Miriam likes the StairMaster. And we very much enjoy swimming. We have a house out in Sagaponack. Miriam and I usually begin taking the weekends, the start of April, out in the Hamptons. We love Sagaponack. There's people if you want to socialize but you can also keep to yourself. I'm not a big social person. We like to read, mostly, and she does origami. We used to have a place in Tappan. There's a few different ways to go but I usually take I-95. It's a half hour. We prefer the beach, though. We just put in a new roof. I couldn't believe the estimate. My God, those contractors get you every which way. Look, it's like anything else—you get what you pay for. I tell my kids there are no bargains in this life. There's no free lunch. We have three boys. Seth will be bar-mitzvahed in June."

I began to feel myself gasping for air as Pinchuck's drill cut through my enamel and I fought the onset of Cheyne-Stokes breathing. I sensed my vital signs were ebbing, and I knew I was in trouble when my life began to pass before my eyes and my father was being played by Dame Edna.

Four days later I awoke in the intensive-care unit at Columbia-Presbyterian.

"Thank God you're made of iron," Mike Sweeney said, leaning over my bed.

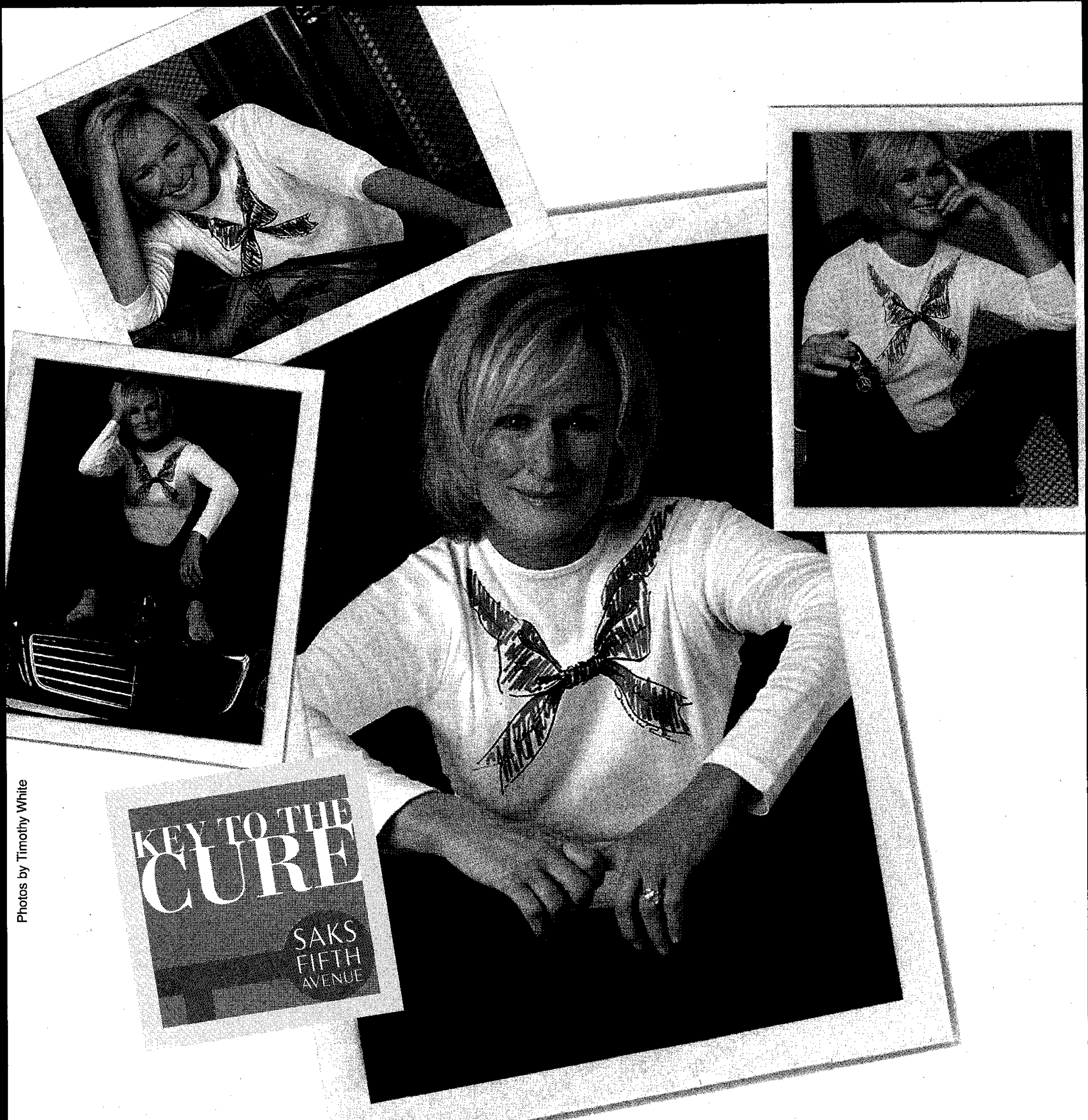
"What happened?" I queried.

"You were very lucky," Mike said. "Just as you lost consciousness, a Mrs. Fay Noseworthy burst into Pinchuck's office with a dental emergency. She was an F.W.I.: Flossing While Intoxicated. Apparently it caused her temporary crowns to slip out and she swallowed them. When you hit the floor at Pinchuck's, she began screaming. Pinchuck panicked and made a run for it. Fortunately, our SWAT team got there just in time."

"Pinchuck ran? But he seemed just like any regular dentist. He worked on my teeth and chatted."

"Right now, you get some rest," Mike said, flashing his Mona Lisa smile, which Sotheby's had claimed was a forgery. "I'll explain it all when you're up on your feet."

In case you're wondering where this little homicide tale goes, keep watching the back pages for news out of Albany, where the legislature will be taking up the bill that will lead to Pinchuck's Law, which makes it a felony for any dentist to endanger the life of a patient by relentless conversation or by saying anything other than "Open wide" or "Please rinse" without a prior court order. ♦



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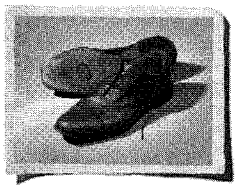

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PERSONAL HISTORY

A RETURN

When we were young, and at war.

BY BEN BRADLEE

The first time I saw the island of Vella Lavella, it was barely daybreak of another cloudless morning in August of 1943. By then, the war in the Pacific was going better for us. The Battle of Midway, in June, 1942, had been costly for the Japanese—many believe it was the war's turning point. And the Americans had full control of Guadalcanal; a captured Japanese document called it "the fork in the road."

Our ship, the Philip, a destroyer, was part of a small task force escorting a half-dozen lumbering landing crafts carrying trucks and tanks and infantry, the vanguard of an invasion force of sixty-five hundred men and eighty-six hundred tons of cargo. Our goal was to patrol what we called "the Slot"—which runs about three hundred miles, from Guadalcanal to Bougainville, in the Solomon Islands—and rid it of Japanese planes and troops. Our tactic was "leapfrogging," or bypassing an enemy-held island to land troops on another, more lightly held island. "Bypass and haul ass," we called it. When we weren't involved in landing troops and supplies, at night each task force would take turns going up the Slot for four or five hours at high speed, returning to Iron Bottom Bay, on Tulagi, thirty miles north of Guadalcanal. If there was no contact with the enemy, we had to be back at daybreak to be under the protection of our own air cover—in case Japanese planes were chasing us.

Vella Lavella lies to the northwest in the Solomon Islands chain, near the Gulf of Vella, and my first glimpse of it was a blip on a radar screen. Except for a different blip on another radar screen, everything looked routine. But that second blip was actually a mess of Zeros, Japanese fighter planes—maybe forty, I guessed—and our task-force commander decided to withdraw the landing crafts in anticipation of the air attack. This preparation consisted of a choking smoke screen laid by the destroyer escorts.

Just as the Zeros spotted us, we emerged from the blackness of the smoke screen. Suddenly, another destroyer, the Waller, turned toward us; as it unmasked its anti-aircraft guns, it smacked us on our port side, just forward of amidships. The collision scraped a couple of our 20-mm. machine guns and a depth charge or two into the sea, but no men were lost. At almost the same moment—as both ships opened fire at the Zeros—the skipper of the Waller grabbed his T.B.S. (the radiophone for talking ship-to-ship) and did something I'd never witnessed at sea: he apologized. The collision left the Philip with a slightly curved indentation for the rest of the war—maybe fifty feet long and twelve inches deep—and it cost us about a knot of maximum speed. It scared the hell out of me. I had been on the bridge, in a space enclosed by blackout curtains, and I was sure we'd been torpedoed. I reached for my life jacket.

The next time I saw Vella Lavella, it was sixty-three years later, a sunny day last April. I was leaning against the rail of the Clipper Odyssey, a ship that was almost the size of the Philip but was outfitted with elevators, air-conditioning, deck chairs, and cocktail lounges. On the Philip, it took me a while just to get the bottom bunk in an officers' cabin; sometimes, there were three "fart sacks" per cabin. (The enlisted men bunked in groups of several dozen, in various parts of the ship.) On the Odyssey, there were eighty-three passengers and almost as many crew. Eight of us—all men, mostly in our eighties—had fought in, and over, the Solomons, and for most of the voyage we eyed one another awkwardly, rarely recounting sea stories. Most of the passengers were strangers to each other—veterans' relatives, widows and children, Second World War buffs, or hard-core cruise fans.

As we drew closer to the island, a

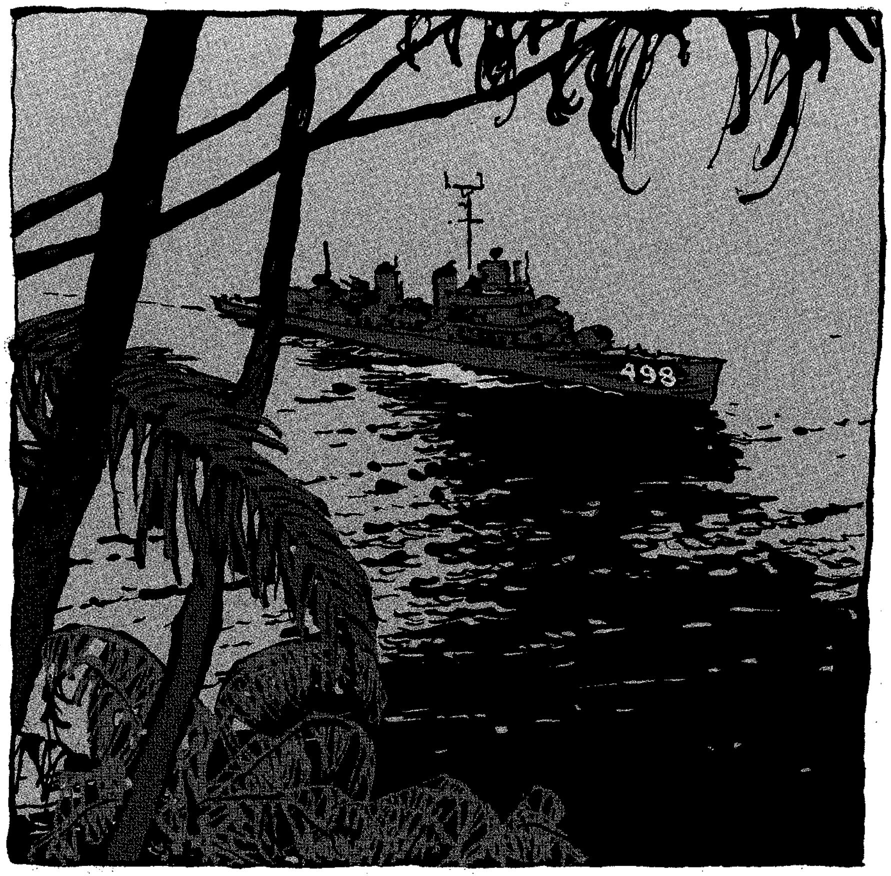
couple of dugout canoes, paddled mostly by young boys, approached the Odyssey. The paddlers were dark-skinned, with an occasional shock of tightly curled hair that was dyed reddish blond; they were smiling and giving us a once-over. The island's vegetation was dense and reached down to the water. At first glance, it looked just the way it had sixty years ago—except that there were no other ships. Beaches that we'd never had a chance to appreciate were around a small point.

One of the other veterans was Bob Simpson, who was born in Juneau, Alaska, in July, 1915; when he graduated from Stanford Medical School, in 1942, a career in internal medicine was ahead of him. As he looked at Vella Lavella from a rail around the swimming pool, on Lido deck, he remembered his last time there. He had managed to locate fifty-two cases of bourbon and had enlisted a Marine fighter squadron to pick them up in the Russell Islands, two hundred miles to the south. The colonel commanding the squadron was given four cases in gratitude.

"It was a little tiny island," Simpson recalled later, in the bar of the Odyssey, "and they'd given us a transport ship—the U.S.S. Callaway—and the usual destroyer escort and some L.S.T.s," landing crafts carrying tanks. "We got up there two days later, a beautiful day, and we went ashore and they told us when we hit the shore, 'There's not a Jap on the island.' Perfect.

"We were just standing there; suddenly, about as far as from here to there"—he pointed to a piano across the room—"there was a horrendous explosion in the bushes. Felt like the whole island shook. We didn't know what it was. A couple of us ran out, with a couple of corpsmen; we heard someone yell, 'Corpsmen! Corpsmen!' We ran out there; a squad of marines was passing by, and one of them had a packsack filled with tetryl, a solid explosive and supposedly perfectly safe, but he leaned over and as he touched the ground—*wham!* As I ran up to the scene, there was a butt sticking out of the bushes, about waist high, just a bent butt, a human butt, and it had on Marine underwear. That was all I could see. And whoever it was was calling, 'Help me! Help me! Help me!' I said, 'O.K., boy, I've got you,' and I reached into my pack—a pack that all corpsmen and doctors carry—and took out an injection of morphine, called a syrette. I opened it and I jammed it through his underwear, right into his butt, and squeezed it. In a minute or so he began to quiet down, and we put him under the bushes and laid him out on a stretcher. Two of the corpsmen took him down a little trail toward the tent. I started to walk behind him, and I looked down on the trail behind him and saw a foot lying on the trail. I reached out and picked it up and it was warm and it had a Marine sock on it. I held this in my hand, and I followed them to the aid tent and went over and checked him but he had both his feet. I got a couple of corpsmen, and we went back and found another kid in the bushes, blown to bits, and this, of course, was his foot. So we had one dead there, and this other kid died shortly after.

"Then that night one of the Marine runners was taking a message from the colonel somewhere, and they hollered 'Halt!' and I guess he didn't hear them. There must have been five men there. They all shot at once. He was dead. I did my last amputation a couple days later. That was a beautiful island. My first battle. And we lost four men."



For the crew of a destroyer, shore bombardment is an intimate affair.

EMMANUEL GUIBERT

Only about fifty destroyers exist today, but during the Second World War five hundred and seventy-four of these long, fast ships were in commission. Thousands of Americans who served aboard them, including me, thought that they had the most exciting and glamorous jobs in the seagoing Navy. We didn't want shore duty, and we didn't want big battleships—they were like hotels, with three thousand people. On a destroyer, if there were twenty officers that was a lot. And these ships could go like hell—close to forty m.p.h. The Philip, built in the Kearny, New Jersey, shipyard in 1942, was twenty-one hundred tons, fifteen feet longer than a football field, and just under forty feet wide amidships. It was named for a Civil War-era officer, John Woodward Philip, famous in naval lore for once admonishing his crew during one battle, "Don't laugh, men, the poor bastards are dying."

My chance to go back to the Solomons began last spring when I spotted a mention in *Tin Can Sailor*, a quarterly tabloid devoted to Navy destroyers. The article described a twelve-day tour, through the Slot. I was curious to see what it was like there today, but I also wanted to get an idea of what I was like back then, when I was a young man. My son, Quinn, a documentary-film student, was eager to see where I'd been during the war, my wife signed on, and suddenly there we were—lying off Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, after a two-day cruise from Papua New Guinea. We sat in the brightest sun, listening to a man named Bob Reynolds, who had piloted Lancaster bombers for the Royal Air Force during the war and was now serving as one of the ship's designated experts. I had never been that close to Guadalcanal. In 1943, the last time I was in the area, Guadalcanal was "secure" but not safe. I'm sure there was a difference, but I still can't define it.

Fifteen thousand Americans died on Guadalcanal in six months of jungle fighting. There is a monument: several polished granite blocks, each about eight feet high and fifteen feet wide and facing a different site. Airstrips are still visible through grass-covered macadam, but they're never used. Tourists are scarce. A handful of natives sell trinkets—bits of polished or painted wood. A few children interrupted their play to stare at us.

None of the veterans on the Odyssey had served on Guadalcanal, but C. C. (Tommy) Thomason's ship had been sunk during the Battle of Guadalcanal, on Friday, November 13, 1942. He was an electrician's mate, third class, on the U.S.S. Monssen, a destroyer and part of an American task group trying to stop a Japanese task force. In the battle's first half hour, four American destroyers were lost; Thomason was at the Monssen's steering station when his ship was hit. Thomason, a stooped, white-haired man, didn't say much during the cruise, but during the summer he sent me a written version of what happened after he and some of his men were in the water:

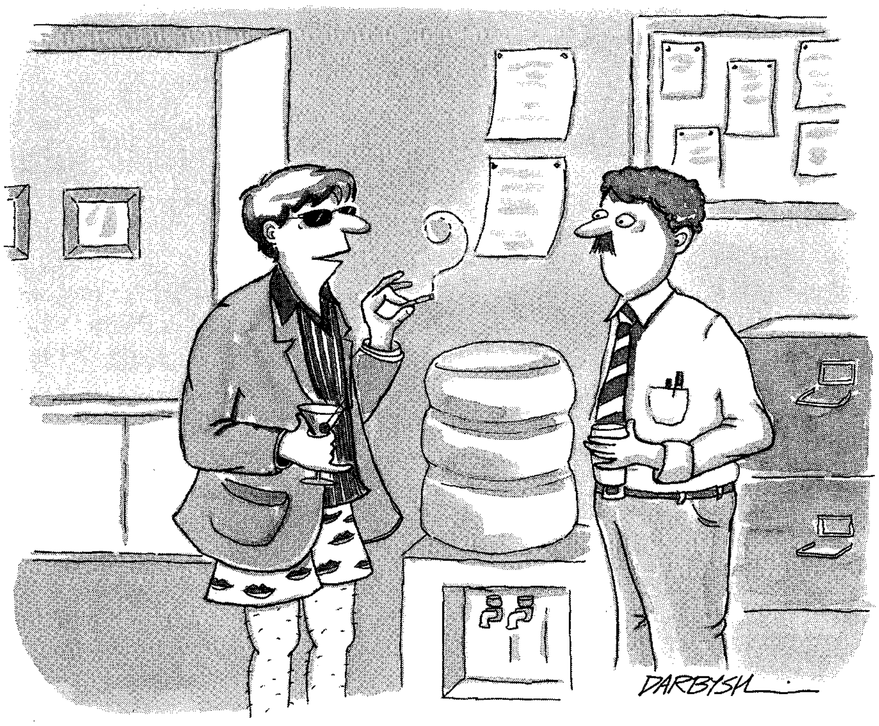
> When it was daylight, three tall shark fins started circling. [Three men nearby] didn't want any part of them, they said they would rather be blown up with the ship than eaten by sharks, so they started back for the ship. At about ten, I caught up with a raft and whaleboat that were carrying a few of our men and some other men that I didn't know. One of them was one of our officers (he was a young new reserve that I didn't know very well, so I forget his name. He seemed pretty bashful on the ship). He had his guts hanging out of his stomach. He could barely talk, but he told me that he had to go to the bathroom. I told him to go ahead and go. He said he couldn't with all those men around, so I took him out away from the raft about twenty feet and took his pants down for him. When he said he was through, I took him back to the raft, and he was dead within ten or fifteen minutes.

When the Philip collided with the Waller, I had been at sea for about six months. I was twenty-two. Just a year earlier—on a single day—I'd graduated from Harvard, I was commissioned as an ensign in the United States Navy, and I got married to my first girlfriend, Jean Saltonstall. We had about six weeks together before I shipped out.

I first boarded the Philip early in 1943, not long after she was put in commission. We sailed from the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and I remember that as we went up the East River we could see the officers' wives waving to us from our apartment building, at the end of Seventy-second Street, no more than a hundred yards away. Then we headed out to sea, escorting the battleship Massachusetts through the Panama Canal, and from there we went directly to Guadalcanal to join a screen of carriers.

Although we were leaving home for an indefinite period, I don't think many of us were feeling homesickness. We were excited. It was our maiden voyage, and, looking back, I know that I was scared—and scared of being scared. We were probably embarrassed to talk about that with each other, but I'm sure that most of us felt that way. I don't think that I was afraid of a Japanese bullet, but I was afraid of going into a battle and of how I would behave. Would I pee in my pants, or go crazy, as some of them did? One man on our ship tried to jump overboard. For the first few months, any observer could have seen fear and even panic on our faces. But when you realized that you could behave properly, it was an exhilarating feeling.

In some important ways I was lucky. I never got seasick, but some of the men did. The worst case was a signalman who was just learning to send semaphores. He was barely seventeen years old, and he would just roll around on the deck in his own vomit, and then he'd get the dry heaves. All of us, though, suffered from the heat: it was unrelenting and, of course, there was no air-conditioning. We never swam; the sewage from the ships would have overwhelmed us.



"When you're nailing the numbers, they don't ask questions."

When I went back last spring, I thought how young everybody had been—and how raw we all were. The captains were young, too—they weren't forty yet, and some of them were barely thirty. The Ivy Leaguers (I was a Greek major) had quite important positions on these ships. I was the C.I.C. officer—in charge of the combat information center, the place to which all information flowed and where it was stripped of nonessentials and directed to people who needed it. The C.I.C. room held the equipment we needed to fight—underwater, on the water, and in the air. In some ways the C.I.C. officer is like a journalist, gathering facts, trying to make sense of them quickly, and getting them out. Once, our first captain came through the C.I.C. space during a blinding thunderstorm; he stuck his head in and said, "Mr. Bradlee, where the hell am I?"

Five officers on the Philip had Ivy League degrees, and we didn't know a thing about what we were doing. The Annapolis graduates were bewildered by us. They knew about electrical engines and how to dismount guns; their modesty surprised us. But we had an odd sort of confidence, and we went from learning about Shakespeare to war in two and a half years. We learned quickly.

On a Sunday morning last April, we were awakened at six-thirty by a scratchy voice on the loudspeaker saying, "Welcome to Bougainville, the most miserable place in the world. It's ninety degrees and humid. Rains every day. Has scorpions, lizards, snakes, and hornets. It's marshland with an active volcano." The voice belonged to one of the veterans aboard the Odyssey. All of a sudden, he was reliving the war.

Bougainville was invaded in November, 1943, by the Marines, who were later reinforced by the Army; I remembered looking at it from the bridge of the Philip, in 1944. Back then, our charts dated from 1919, and were in German. They weren't very accurate, either. Cones of coral stretched from the bottom of a broad bay to a few feet from the water's surface, invisible to navigators but well within reach of ships' propellers. The Philip's propeller nicked a coral peak, and, until it got a new propeller, it shook from stem to stern whenever it went faster than twenty knots. This time, I peered into the blue-green depths for coral, while the Odyssey made it unscathed all the way up Bougainville's coast.

The C.I.C. on the Philip was tucked into a sorry space that had been designed for the navigator. It was less than a hundred and fifty square feet—small, hot, and airless. When the ship was at general quarters (preparing for combat), there was no ventilation. It took five men to run: two radar operators (for the S.G. radar, which looked for surface targets, and the S.C. radar, which looked for planes); a sonar operator, to listen for submarine contact targets; one man to run the plot, or plotting machine; plus the C.I.C. officer.

In addition, the C.I.C. contained the ship's sound-powered telephone system—the one used for internal communications—as well as the T.B.S. What made the space even tighter was the plotting system, which consisted of a fixed plate of glass about four feet square, lighted from beneath, over a small compass circle that moved as the ship moved. With a sheet of thin paper, you could trace a ship's movement in relation to the movement of enemy ships or planes. In a torpedo attack, for instance, if you knew what courses and speeds your torpedo could produce, your "computer" could figure out what course and speed you had to take to reach your optimum firing point.

For the crew of a destroyer, shore bombardment is an intimate affair. The C.I.C. officer is really the eyes and ears of the commanding officer and the gunnery officer—they rely on him to tell them when to shoot and where to shoot. And the C.I.C. is guided by soldiers onshore, at the front, sometimes picking targets as close as twenty yards away from them. At Saipan, in the northern Marianas, one of these soldiers turned out to be a twenty-two-year-old marine. We both had the same maps, which divided the battlefield into small chunks of real estate, and we talked on radiotelephones. The marine gave me instructions, and the Philip would fire a smoke-filled shell, to check the coördinates. Then, when our shell hit where he wanted it, he would call for barrage after barrage. Whenever he had his microphone button on, we could hear our shells land and his reactions. And we could let the entire ship hear the conversation—literally follow the battle round by round. After almost three days, we were both relieved, and I asked the marine if he would like a shower and a good night's sleep, between sheets (the sheets meant a lot). We sent the whaleboat in to the beach to pick him up. He was mobbed when he came aboard, with tears in his eyes. I remember how tense he looked, and how, even to our youthful crew, he looked so young. To my shame, I have lost his name.

Aboard the Clipper Odyssey, where we listened to lectures, drank a little, and often stopped to go ashore, the silence of the eight Solomon Islands veterans continued. One of these men said nothing at all, and one day his wife tried to explain his silence. "He couldn't remember anything," she told me. "He's repressed it all. He doesn't feel sad. He doesn't feel anything. He's trying to get his memory back during this trip."

When we came to Guam, we saw a memorial with the names of America's war dead, and, somehow, I found solace when I saw my friend Peter Saltonstall's name carved on the wall. Peter died two days after the hostilities on Guam had ceased—killed by a sniper. He was a cousin of Jean's, and I recalled his happy smile the time he sat in a barber's chair that he'd bolted to the floor of his freshman dorm room.The first Japanese we saw were in Guam—tourists and honeymooners. It gave me an odd feeling to see Japanese tourists at these memorials. For part of the war, Admiral W. F. (Bull) Halsey had put up a billboard on a hillside of the island of Tulagi saying "Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs." It was never that personal for me; on the Philip, we thought about doing damage to ships and shore installations before we thought about killing anybody.

During my time in the Pacific, I saw only two Japanese faces. One was the pilot of a Betty, a Japanese bomber, who jumped our small landing task force. We fired at him but had to stop when we saw that he'd already been hit by an American fighter, which we might have hit if we hadn't stopped shooting. The Japanese pilot's plane was half gliding, half diving into the sea, less than fifty feet off our starboard side. Just before he crashed into the water, our eyes met. People told me then, and tell me now, that I proba-

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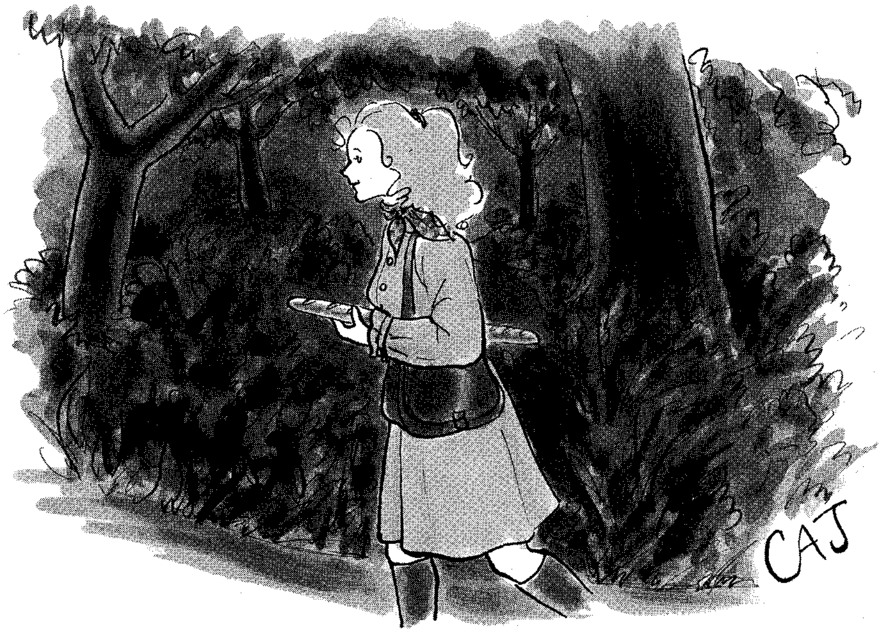

Jennifer Felt Perfectly Safe Walking Through the Park at Night with Her Handy Cast-Iron Baguette.

• •

bly did not actually see him, because he was going too fast and I was doing too many other things to stare at any one thing. Never mind; I can still recall his face—passive, perhaps already dead. The bomb he carried was never released and never exploded. The splash he made when he hit the water drenched those of us who were watching.

The other Japanese I saw, near the end of the war, was a man we fished out of the water. He must have weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet; I'd been ordered to arrest him, and had my .45 pistol ready. We didn't have any place to put him, so we used the so-called brig, even while some of the enlisted men were shouting, "Throw the bastard back, Mr. Bradlee!" We kept him aboard and fed him, and then we turned him over as a prisoner to a flagship, where people who had nothing better to do took care of captured soldiers. He must have been one of the last survivors of the second Battle of Corregidor, in 1945, when the Americans retook the island from the Japanese.

I didn't get back to the States until the fall of 1944, and then it was only for six weeks, while our ship was being overhauled in Oakland. Being "home" without having a home was oddly incomplete; you were partly a hero, technically a husband, and everything you did was overshadowed by the knowledge that you were going back to the war. In a way, Jean and I were strangers, even though we both hoped that we would head for a new beginning when the war was over. Our marriage lasted thirteen years.

For the last year of the war, I served on the staff of Commander Destroyers, Pacific Fleet, or ComDesPac, as an expert in C.I.C. I spent up to two weeks in the C.I.C. rooms of various destroyers—nineteen in all—as they fought their way up through the Philippines toward Tokyo; I was supposed to pass on to each ship's C.I.C. the techniques that I had allegedly mastered. We knew by then that the war was ending, and we thought about what we were going to do afterward. We talked about government and public service. I thought that I might teach high school. When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, in August of 1945, I was in the wardroom of a fleet tanker, waiting to catch a ride with a ship that was heading home. Nobody in our immediate vicinity knew anything about atomic energy, but the skipper knew that I was a Harvard graduate (never mind a Greek major) and asked me to write a short explanatory treatise on the subject. The document has not survived.

I returned to the States in the fall, but didn't get my discharge from the Navy until early in 1946. Jobs were scarce—there was a hiring freeze, because companies were required to hold open the positions of people who had gone off to war. While I was looking for work, a family friend offered me a job cataloguing the library of the American Civil Liberties Union, and by then I had given up the idea of teaching. I wanted to be a reporter, even though the best newspapers—the *Times*, the *Herald Tribune*—had only copyboy positions available to would-be journalists. Then, in March of 1946, I joined a group of men launching a new Sunday paper in Manchester, New Hampshire, the *New Hampshire Sunday News*, and that was how I got started in the newspaper business.

The Philip, which earned nine battle stars by the end of the war (and five more in Korea), lies at the bottom of the Pacific. It was sunk during a storm in 1972, while under tow; it was being delivered to a company in Taiwan as scrap. There had been reunions of the ship's crew over the years, but I had never gone to one until this past July, in Norfolk, Virginia.

When I walked into the lobby of the hotel, I was keeping a dinner date with Horris Schroeder, who, when I first met him, in 1942, had been a sonar man in the Philip's C.I.C. He was easy to pick out: he still had a full head of hair (though it was no longer dark), but it helped that he was wearing a beat-up baseball cap with "U.S.S. Philip" stitched over the visor. Horris was a few months older than me; his girlfriend was the most beautiful woman of eighty-eight I have ever seen.

It took us about five minutes to get comfortable talking about the war. "It's been a hell of a long time," I think one of us said. Horris is still active; he works as a construction supervisor in Buffalo. We agreed that our years on the Philip still meant a lot to us, and we remembered much of it. For instance, we remembered how relieved we were when we realized that fear was not going to interfere with our jobs. And how we laughed late one afternoon when, after sixty days at sea, the chief medical corpsman showed up on deck sloppy drunk. His drink of choice was a concoction involving torpedo alcohol. Horris even remembered when I was "wounded" in the rear end—it felt like a fast-moving squash ball—and the word spread through the ship's sound-powered phone system that "Mr. Bradlee has been hit in the ass with a piece of shrapnel." (There was no blood, and to my mind it did not qualify for a Purple Heart.) We talked about smoke screens and Japanese Bettys and Zeros and the only time—at least while I was aboard—that we had dropped depth charges on what we thought were Japanese submarines. Sixty-three years later, Horris and I agreed with the Navy's official conclusion: If there had been a submarine down there, we had not hit it.

At breakfast the next morning and on into lunchtime, the conversation kept going. We were joined by Steve Benedict, who was with the Philip when she was commissioned, and then by some members of the ship's postwar crews—men now in their sixties and seventies. For me, this was something new. Before I went to Norfolk, I had never indulged in any organized reminiscence; I rarely talked even to friends or family about the war. My father had had a long friendship with Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, and that connection had kept him pretty well informed about where the Philip was and what she was up to while I was aboard, but my other relatives didn't seem interested when I came home. In 1946, who cared what you did in the war? I thought that the people who sat around and talked about their war were terrible bores.

And yet, at least for me, it was the most important period of my life—really the first thing I did. I was born, I had polio, I went to college—and I was in the war. Although it wasn't long before it faded against my new life—starting a family and getting a job—it marked me. It may sound trite to modern ears, but those really were years when you could get involved in something beyond yourself—something that connected you to your times in ways that no longer seem so natural, or expected. This past spring, aboard the Odyssey, I believe that the Pacific war veterans, despite their reticence, knew this, and that they were comforted by it. ♦

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The reign of Helen Mirren.

BY JOHN LAHR

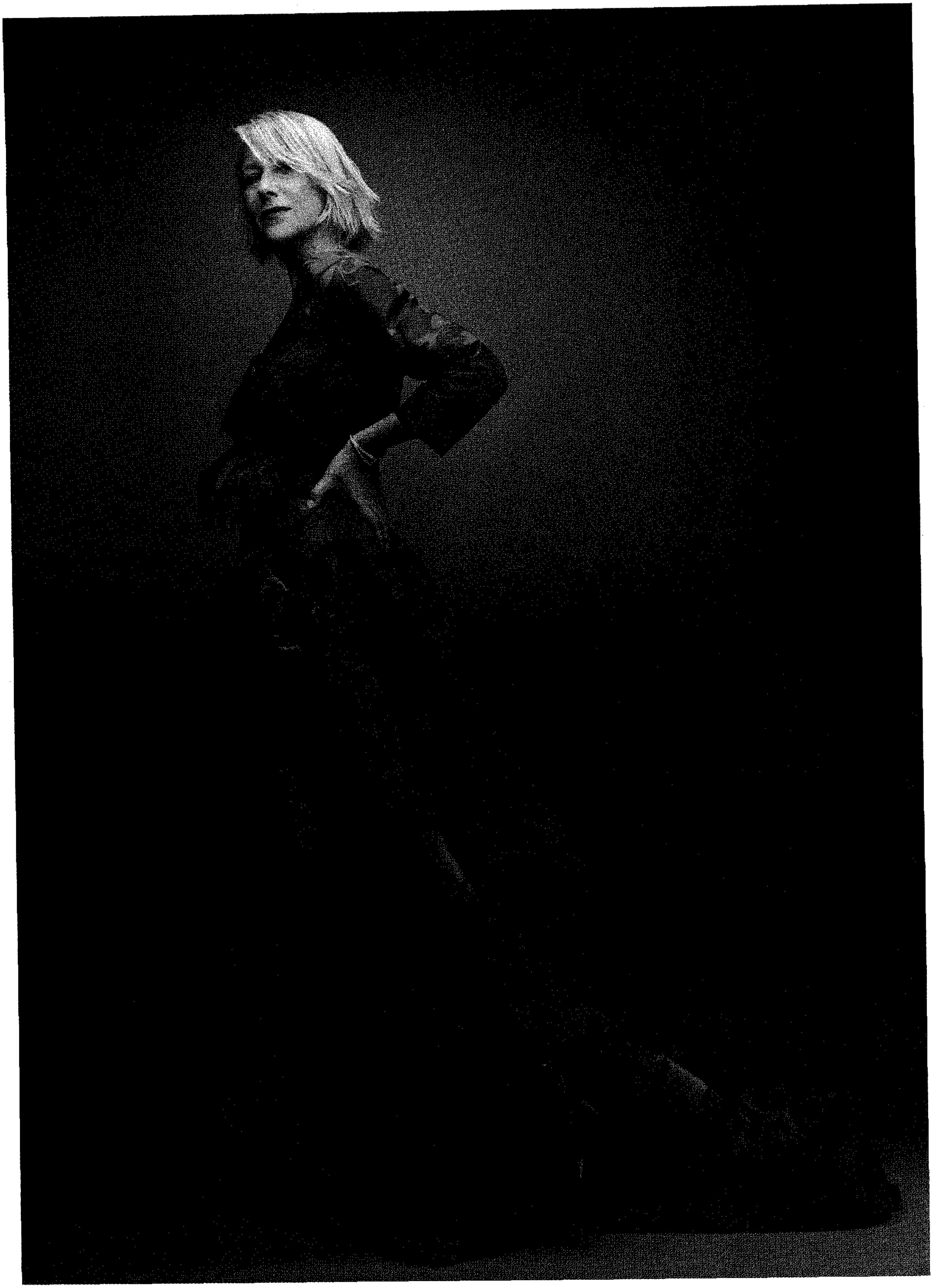
If you go east on Sunset Boulevard and take a left onto one of those burned-out stretches of arterial road which cut across the main drag like stitches on a baseball, you pass laundromats, motels, gas stations, pawnshops, and burger stands, until the road abruptly dead-ends at the base of the foothills beside Runyon Canyon. Towering bamboo plants block any glimpse of what lies up above. To the side are the gates of a private road, a terrace hidden behind palm fronds and hibiscus. This vertiginous landscape is one of the places that the actress Helen Mirren calls home. To enter her driveway is like going from black-and-white to Technicolor.

Since she decamped from Britain to Los Angeles, in 1984, Mirren has spent much of her time living on these fecund six acres with her husband, the director Taylor Hackford ("An Officer and a Gentleman," "Dolores Claiborne," "Ray"). (They also have homes in London, Provence, and New York.) Mirren claims to have got Hackford interested in horticulture, but it's forestry, more like. She gardens; he plants trees. Their driveway switchbacks up a steep incline—past Mexican palms, Italian cypresses, birds-of-paradise, jacaranda, oleander, carob, coral, eucalyptus, and Chinese lantern trees—to a clearing in front of a cream-colored Monterey Spanish-style house with faded green shutters, a shake roof, and wrought-iron balconies overhanging a veranda, which looks down onto a long aquamarine pool. Built in 1929 by the silent-screen star Dustin Farnum, the house exudes the patrician restraint of Old Hollywood—a regal indifference to the city, which can't be seen or heard, just a few hundred yards below. The isolation of the place satisfies what the sixty-one-year-old Mirren calls her "appetite for solitude"; its scenic grandeur suggests her public stature. Much of what dazzles the eye has come into full bloom in the last fifteen years. So has Mirren's career.

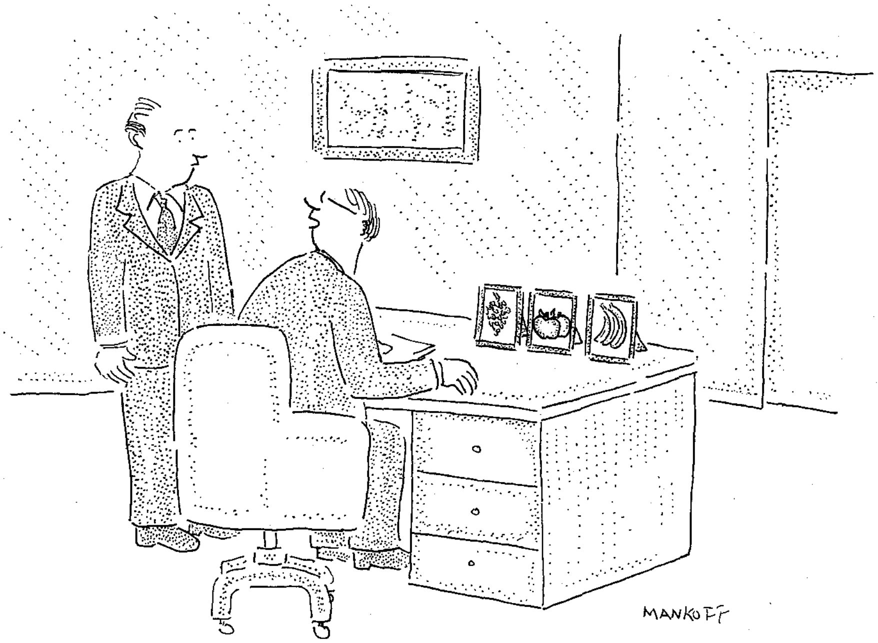
Until the first season of the groundbreaking television series "Prime Suspect" aired, in 1991, Mirren, even in her best films—"The Long Good Friday," "Cal," "The Mosquito Coast," "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover"—was always to be found on the edges of the story. "I used to feel like a racehorse pulling a cart in some of those roles," she said. Since the success of "Prime Suspect"—"the most sustained example of great acting in the history of television," *Esquire* called it—she has driven the narratives. In the last eight years, on the main stages of London and New York, Mirren, who was made Dame Helen in 2003, has played the long-suffering Lady Torrance in Tennessee Williams's "Orpheus Descending," the trapped Alice in Strindberg's "Dance of Death," the villainous Christine in Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra," and, for the third time in her career, the rapacious Cleopatra in Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra." This fall, two more virtuoso exhibitions of her work will reach the public. On PBS, in the seventh and final season of "Prime Suspect," Mirren's steely and vulnerable Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison will fight one last battle against the London police force's patriarchal attitudes, against criminals, and against her own flawed nature. And Mirren's depiction of Queen Elizabeth II, in Stephen Frears's "The Queen," a deft exploration of the politics of sovereignty and the Royal Family's reaction to the death of Princess Diana, will open the New York Film Festival this week.

Although there is nothing remotely grand about Mirren in person—she is lively and low-key—she is clearly comfortable with herself, and that strength of character translates easily to performances of the formidable. "Probably no other actress can let you know as fast and economically as she can that she's playing a distinguished and important woman," Pauline Kael wrote of Mirren, in an otherwise unenthusiastic review of "White Nights" (1985). "Even as a teenager, she had a thing about regality," the actor Kenneth Cranham, whom Mirren calls her "first proper boyfriend," said. "She's always had that hauteur. It was that thing of being apart and having poise and taking it all in." "I don't mind if I don't have any lines as long as I get to wear a crown," Mirren once quipped. Her début with the National Youth Theatre, at the age of nineteen, was as the Queen of Egypt in "Antony and Cleopatra." Over the years since then, her royals have gone from the ridiculous—in the unwatchable soft-porn "Caligula" (1979), a film that won her no glory but provided a down payment on her first home—to the remarkable, her Queen Charlotte in "The Madness of King George" (1994), for instance, a performance for which she earned an Academy Award nomination. Last year, she gave a thrilling, Emmy-winning performance as the title character in the British television miniseries "Elizabeth I." In "The Queen," she undergoes an even more extraordinary transformation. "It may well be that this was the part she was waiting for in some unspoken way," Frears said. "She's bright. She's confident. She's open and honest. So she is in herself challenging," he added. "It seemed essential to cast somebody who made you nervous."

As the current monarch, Mirren delivers an inspired study of royal restraint, which rescues the Queen from both satire and sentimentality. "I cried when I did my costume fitting," Mirren said. "I saw the shoes lined up and the tweed skirts and the sweaters. I said, 'I can't do this.' But I grew to love it." Mirren, who argues that "you have to allow yourself to grow older in front of the camera—you have to not fight it," continued, "Her complete lack of vanity was a comfortable place to be as a woman. You're not striving to



"I don't mind if I don't have any lines as long as I get to wear a crown," Mirren once said. Photograph by Robert Maxwell.



"I love fruit."

look pretty or beautiful or slim. You're 'I'm me. This is me.' It's a mark of a huge ego." As she was speaking about the role, she suddenly stopped and held her hands up in front of her face. "I went like this before I did a take," she said, pulling her palms slowly toward the back of her head, then suddenly swivelling her wrists and thrusting her hands forward, like beams of light, beside her eyes. "She's way back inside herself," she explained. "Her personality, her intelligence, everything is way back. Then she's steadily looking out, as if through a porthole, with this incredibly nonjudgmental, confident gaze. I loved being her. There was an incredible sort of objectivity . . . a sort of deep knowledge of being a monarch." She added, "I thought I had a lot in common with her."

Mirren also identified with the Queen's punctilio as someone who was "performing the role of symbol." "I admire her as an actress," Mirren said. "There's one piece of film I watched over and over again. She was about twelve. She's getting out of one of those big black cars. She's got gloves on. She is very young. She's all alone. It's the way she gets out of the car. She puts her hand forward. She's just doing everything absolutely correctly—that was long before she had any idea that she was going to be queen. She does it with such a sense of dignity and seriousness and discipline." Mirren went on, "I think there are elements of that little girl in me. The sense of wanting to do the right thing, not wanting conflict."

Mirren grew up with the legend of a lost patrician world. Christened Helen Lydia Mironoff, and called Ilyena at home, she was the second of three children born to a handsome, well-educated Russian émigré, Vasily Petrov Mironoff, in 1945. Her mother, Kathleen Rogers, was the thirteenth of fourteen children, a butcher's daughter whose grandfather had been the butcher to Queen Victoria. Until his death, Vasily's father, Pyotr, lived with the family in a two-story house in the suburban working-class backwater of Leigh-on-Sea, in Essex. Pyotr's mother had been a countess whose distinguished military family is mentioned in Tolstoy's "War and Peace." Pyotr himself was a tsarist colonel and military attaché, who was stranded in London while making an arms deal at the time of the Russian Revolution, which he always referred to as a "peasant revolt." At a stroke, he lost his homeland, his pedigree, and his estate, Kuryanov—fifteen hundred acres near the town of Gzhatsk (now Gagarin)—which was, in his day, about twenty-four hours by horse from Moscow. Pyotr, who was, according to Mirren, "extremely proud, and identified with his Russian roots," considered Britain "a gray nation, largely ruled by gray people." He remained in a state of perpetual Chekhovian nostalgia for the motherland; he kept pre-revolutionary rubles in his dresser and etchings of the Tsar and Tsarina on his bedroom walls. "I remember sitting in my grandfather's room and him drawing a map of his Russian lands—where the stables were and where the servants lived," Mirren said. (Vasily, who called himself Basil, waited until his father died, in the early fifties, to change the family name to Mirren.)

If the Mironoffs had been dispossessed of their wealth and their social status, the newly minted Mirrens were, nonetheless, able to generate a sense of their own exclusivity. There was "a slightly us-and-them feeling," Mirren said. "We were quite isolated as a family. We didn't really have friends. Neighbors weren't invited in. We were a little unit unto ourselves. We were trendier than anyone else. We ate yogurt long before anyone else. We were like the first people in our town to wear colored stockings. We were kind of bohemian." Before the Second World War, Basil had had Communist sympathies; afterward, according to Mirren, he remained "extreme left wing." Hatred of the British class system was one of the bonds between him and his wife. His critique was ideological; hers was personal. Kathleen left school at fourteen, and was raised, for the most part, by her sisters. In a sense, she, too, was a displaced person. "She was resentful and angry," Mirren said. "She was anti the class system because it excluded her." Kathleen always remembered an occasion on which she was turned away by a doorman at the Army and Navy store. Later, ambitious for her own children's mobility, she was strict about proper speech; she scraped together money to buy her daughters—Mirren has an older sister, Kate—elocution lessons. Both parents were anti-monarchist and atheist. (When Kathleen died, at the age of eighty-seven, she requested that no funeral be held, and she donated her body to science.)

The family was not well off, and, with

no television, no music, no cinema, and with only occasional exposure to radio, they were almost untouched by popular culture. At St. Bernard's High School, a convent school, where Mirren and her sister were taught by nuns, the list of prohibitions included no jewelry, no short skirts, no sex education, no boys. Until the age of sixteen, when the girls were allowed out on dates, their only freedom was intellectual. "Our stimulation was discussion," Mirren recalled. "Over the dinner table, we would have these serious talks about life and art and the soul." In this straitened atmosphere, she said, there was always a sense "that this isn't where we finish up. You take your opportunity, you get educated, you make yourself economically independent. And that's still with me." Mirren's unabashed and un-English ambition was fuelled to some degree by the unspoken disappointment around her. "There was absolutely a sense of non-realized potential, especially in my father," she said. By the accounts of both sisters, Basil was gentle, affectionate, attentive, solitary, and, according to Mirren, "very artistic." Before the war, he had played the viola with the London Philharmonic; afterward, he drove a taxi. Eventually, he became a driving-test examiner, and drove his cab on weekends.

Mirren, who, according to the director Trevor Nunn, was known as Little Mother Russia during her early days at the Royal Shakespeare Company, identified strongly with her father and the frustrated trajectory of his life. "I wanted to be a great performer," she said. "I mean *great*." Her sense of drama and of glamour, however, came from her tempestuous mother. "I don't think my mother was a natural mother," Mirren said of Kathleen, who once held her out of the window and said, "If you don't stop crying, I'm going to drop you." Over the years, according to Kate, the two sisters and their younger brother, Peter, "all learned to be very protective of our egos, because we would have been completely destroyed. She could be truly horrible." "When she was saying stuff I didn't want to hear," Mirren said, "I developed this trick of appearing to hear—'Yes, yes,' 'Right, I'll try that'—but having no idea what she'd said." Nonetheless, Mirren's own strength was defined by contending with her mother's volatile intensity. "She was very imaginative, very passionate," she said. Once, Mirren came home from school to find the house in chaos and her mother stumbling around blindfolded. "She'd been like that for five hours," she said. "She'd read something about a blind person and had been very affected by it. She felt that she had to experience what it was like to be blind."

Mirren also had an active imagination. Within the family, she was known as Popper or Pop, "because she would pop off into dreams," her sister said. She slept with an image of Goya's face under her pillow. "I thought that somehow I'd been caught in the wrong time zone, and really I was supposed to be Goya's mistress or wife," Mirren said. At thirteen, she was captivated by an amateur production of "Hamlet" at the local theatre. "Sword fights and girls going mad, evil kings and queens taking poison—what a fantastic world!" she said. "So exciting in comparison to walking to the launderette for the washing." She began to read Shakespeare, and for a school production—grovelling on the ground and growling—she took on Caliban, a part that none of her classmates had wanted to tackle. "I just got into it," she said, recalling the exhilaration "of living in this wonderful exotic world, of a creature locked in this awful physical prison but with a dim sense that there was something else out there."

Although she has described her younger self as "totally and ridiculously inhibited," Mirren found that she could be bolder in role-playing than she was in life. "All I knew was that I really loved it," she said. "It was something I was good at without having to work too hard—or, at least, it was work I wanted to do." "I want to be the Sarah Bernhardt of my generation," she confided to her sister. Her parents weren't pleased. "Don't be ridiculous," her mother said. "People like us aren't actors." There was no money for drama school, and Mirren grudgingly followed her sister on a scholarship to a teachers' training college in London. Nonetheless, without telling her parents—"I didn't want to fail publicly," she said—she successfully auditioned for the National Youth Theatre. Mirren was eighteen; by twenty, she was selling out the Old Vic.

Last July, I joined Mirren and Hackford for their annual trip to Del Mar, in San Diego, for some horse racing: the sport of kings—and, apparently, of sometime queens. The track is two hours by train from downtown Los Angeles. On the way to the station, Hackford stopped to buy the *Daily Racing Form* at a newsstand on Hollywood Boulevard. When he got back in the car, he was pointing to the vender, a woman in sunglasses and a straw fedora behind a wall of magazines. "A classic Hollywood look," he said to Mirren, who sat in the back seat with her cap of white hair still damp from the morning's shower. "Did you see the lady with the nails? She's got these long nails; every one is a different color." Hackford is tall and thin, with a distinguished white beard and the rumpled nonchalance of a teacher. By nature, he is a doer and an explainer, a take-charge guy who answers to the nickname Jefe and whose knowledge is imparted with brio and the occasional sizzle of impatience. His curiosity has led him over the years from the Peace Corps to television investigative journalism and documentary filmmaking and, finally, to feature films. (He won an Oscar in 1979 for "Teenage Father," a short; he was nominated again in 2005, for "Ray.") Although he shares with Mirren a working-class background, he does not share her metabolism. Hackford churns up the water around him; Mirren considers herself "a slug." "I always wanted to be Pierre Bonnard's wife," she said. "Lie around, have baths, be painted constantly as a young person surrounded by beautiful flowers and satin gowns." At the train terminal, Hackford headed off at a trot. "O.K., babe, we're gonna have to hoof it," he said.

Mirren met Hackford in 1984, when she went to audition for "White Nights," which he directed. He was twenty minutes late. "I was very angry," she said. "I was sort of rude." Hackford told the London *Times*, "I apologized but there was a cold disdain from her. I tried to make small talk and she said, 'Are we going to read?' She was smoking, man! Then she asked if there was anything else, and *boom*, she was out of there." Mirren and Hackford moved into their Los Angeles aerie in 1986, and were married in 1997—she for the first time, at the age of fifty-two, he for the third, at fifty-three. (Hackford has two children from his previous marriages; Mirren has none.) "He wasn't like anyone I'd ever been with," Mirren said, once we were safely on the train and Hackford had been dispatched to the rear of the top deck to study the nags. "Much more edgy but also much more exciting, more driven. He still surprises me after however many years. He's incredibly free as a person and he lets me be free. The other thing I've always loved is that he treats women with equality, without even thinking about it. He just looks women in the eye and takes their human value. That's so un-Hollywood." She added, "He can be very, very difficult."

A leader onstage, at home Mirren seems happy to be led. "Let's face it," she told Barney Reisz, one of the producers of "Elizabeth I," while discussing possible actors for one of the leads. "Every woman likes a man who makes a decision, doesn't she?" "She's always been wifely in all her relationships," Kate told me. "She's much more 'Well, if that's what you want, darling, we'll do it.' " To me, Mirren explained, "I have to say, without sounding like a total tosser, that everything I've learned in life, and that has taken me out of my natural interior life, has been with men. They exposed me to things that I wasn't aware of. I learned from all the guys." The main relationships to which Mirren was referring were with the actors Kenneth Cranham, Bruce Myers, and Liam Neeson, the photographer James Wedge, and Prince George Galitzine. Onstage and off, Mirren has been defined by her intelligence; however, she still professes to "feeling rather stupid," a sense of deficit that, incidentally, makes her a good audience. She listens, she adds to the thought, and she also wants to be told. She glanced out the window of the train. "There is that awful moment when you realize that you're falling in love," she said. "That should be the most joyful moment, and actually it's not. It's always a moment that's full of fear because you know, as night follows day, the joy is going to rapidly be followed by some pain or other. All the angst of a relationship. You go, 'Oh, no. Please, no.' You go, 'Yes, I'm in love. No, I'm in love.' "

She settled back in her seat, as the train sped past a beachfront amusement park. "I've always had that slight attraction to the fairground, the circus, the tattooed," she said. As a teen-ager, Mirren worked as a shill for rides at a local Southend amusement park. "The boys who did the Dodge 'Ems, with their dirty T-shirts and their leather jackets. I never liked the clean guys. I liked the slightly dirty kinds." From the outset of her career, Mirren made a legend of her daring, which included a certain sexual brazenness. "She was like a Rubens in bluejeans," Cranham said. In 1968, as Cressida in the Royal Shakespeare Company's "Troilus and Cressida," she spun almost naked across the stage, and was soon dubbed by the British broadsheets "the Sex Queen of Stratford." "I never wriggled out of that," Mirren said. Over the years, she has both condemned and parlayed the idea of herself as a sex symbol. "I have traded on it," she told the *Independent* in 2001. "I do the tousled thing from time to time. . . . I can do the dirty thing. . . . But at some point you decide enough of that, I had better move on." To me, she explained, "I think for a long time it was very hard for people to see past my physical outward appearance. I was a blond girl with big tits. I hated that image. It was so uncomfortable for me, and distasteful." Nonetheless, when Mirren auditioned for the R.S.C., in 1967, Trevor Nunn, then a director with the company, recalled, "A girl came out who appeared to be wearing a garment constructed of black string. It had more spaces between it than it covered. Conversation stopped completely. Jaws dropped. We saw from her C.V. that she'd had no professional experience. She was passionate about doing classical work. I make no bones about it—I think the red blood cells and testosterone were up a considerable level. I don't think anybody contemplated for a moment that she should be told to go away and get experience somewhere else." Nunn added, "We were looking at a major leading player after she'd been with the company a couple of years."

In 1972, Mirren interrupted her R.S.C. career to join the director Peter Brook's experimental theatre company on a yearlong international tour, which included three months in African villages—what she called "a voyage into the unknown." In "Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa," the critic John Heilpern describes Mirren—the last actor to join the troupe—this way: "Helen Mirren, twenty-six, a star perhaps, outspoken, generous, bright, luscious, lost." He continues, "Part of her dilemma might be that she couldn't decide whether to be a classical actress or a Hollywood movie star. You can't have both apparently. The Brook experiment was entangled with her search for an answer." According to Mirren, her goal in joining Brook was "to liberate myself." Although nudity was not difficult for her—she has bared all in several films, from her first, "Age of Consent" (1969), to "Calendar Girls" (2003), and, at fifty, she posed naked for the cover of Britain's *Radio Times*—she felt weighted down by a sense of physical embarrassment. "I've always been battling against my sense of dignity and refinement," she said. "I was embarrassed by any bodily functions when I was younger. I could never even blow my nose. When I went out on dates as a girl, I could never say, 'Excuse me, I want to go to the ladies'.' That's why I got a reputation for refusing to kiss anyone at the gate. By the time I got to the gate, I was always dying to go to the loo."

This conflict between inhibition and exhibition has had a bearing on all aspects of Mirren's performing. "I think a lot of my life, and especially my work life, has been spent learning how to be brave," she said. Her sex appeal seems to reside not in her cleavage but in her emotional availability, her complicated combination of hauteur, courage, and empathy. "Helen doesn't say, 'Please love me. Look, I'll smile nicely, and you'll love me,' " Frears told me. "She's not inviting you in the way other actresses often are. She just says, 'This is what it's like,' and that's what you love about her. She confronts something, and she doesn't sentimentalize it." "She goes for life," Jeremy Irons, who co-starred with Mirren in "Elizabeth I," said. "That's why she's alluring to men. She is the complete antithesis of the vapid."

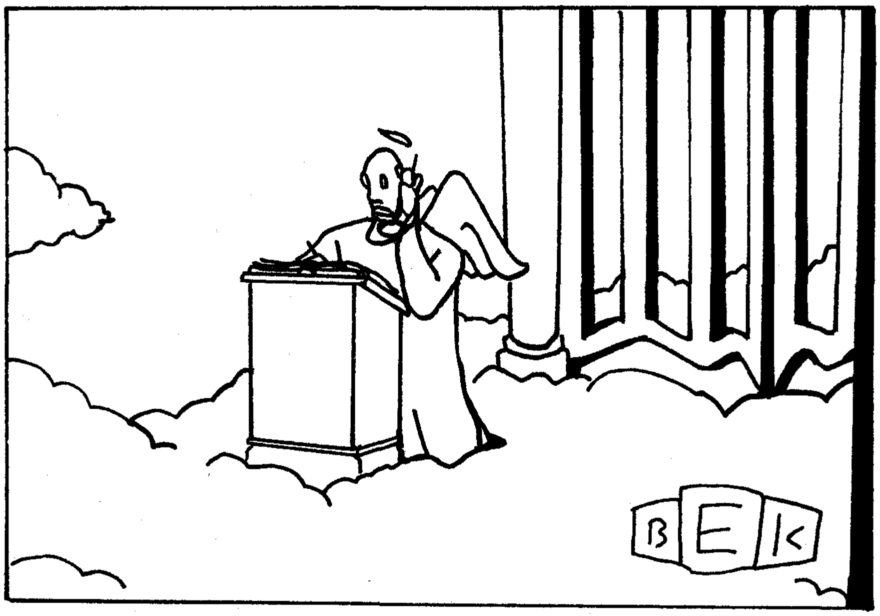
Mirren's reputation for wildness owes much to the vividness of her early performances. In the mid-seventies, she followed a sinister and seductive Lady Macbeth ("I really do regret that Shakespeare never knew Miss Mirren," Harold Hobson wrote in the London *Sunday Times*) with a breakout appearance as the drunk and disorderly rock singer Maggie Frisby in David Hare's 1975 "Teeth 'n' Smiles," the first and best British play about the barbarity of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. "It was such a great role," she said. "Your first entrance is being carried across the stage over someone's shoulder, completely drunk. Everyone's been talking about you for the last twenty minutes, anyway. It was fabulous." Mirren, who had to belt out a number of songs, couldn't carry a note. "I am profoundly unmusical," she said. "But I learned this amazing thing. If you've got the chutzpah, you can persuade the audience of anything."

The same year, at the first read-through for Lindsay Anderson's revival of "The Seagull," in which Mirren gave an acclaimed performance as Nina, opposite Joan Plowright's Arkadina, the cast was sitting around after deconstructing the first act, when Mirren said, "I wonder if Nina and Trigorin ever have an affair." "Joan looked at me," she said. " 'Helen?'—her little brown eyes beadily looking at me. 'Have you read the play?' I realized I'd made the most appalling gaffe. I'd just heard that it was a great role. Joan was in it. Lindsay was directing. Of course I said yes. But I'm terribly lazy. I find it very hard to read plays. I find it hard to understand who's who and where they're supposed to be. I get utterly confused."

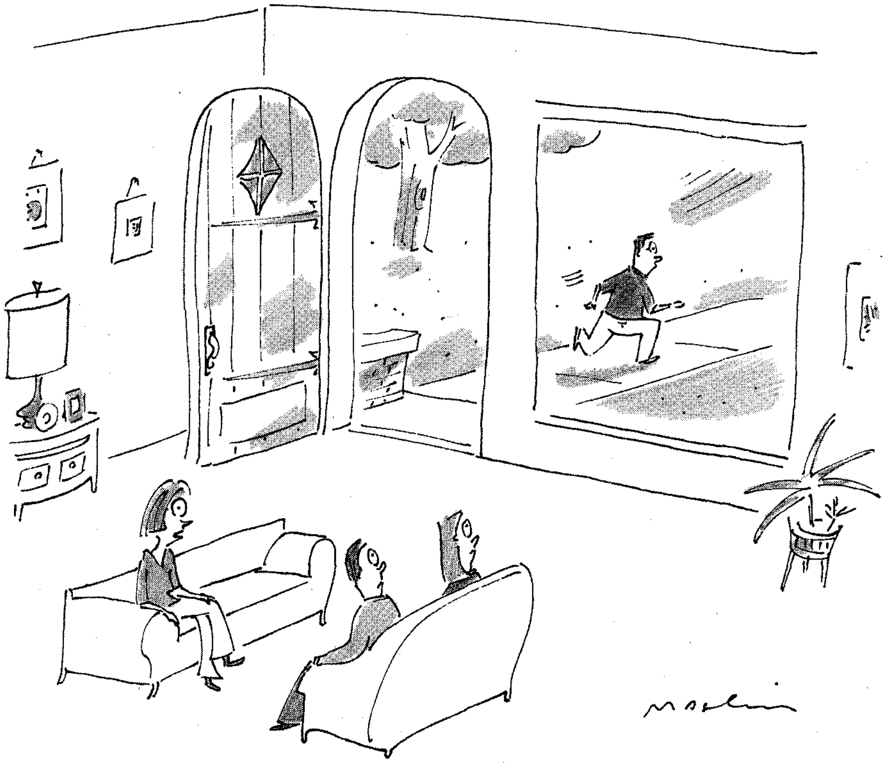
Mirren's legend of her own laziness (one that is easily belied by a quick glance at her résumé, with its forty-five films and thirty stage roles) is not, it seems, a pretension but a sort of psychological self-defense—a way of protecting the impulsive, childlike part of herself and her imagination. Describing "Composition VII" by Wassily Kandinsky, her favorite painter, she said, "Color, form, the appearance of improvisation: in fact, it's intensely, beautifully worked out." She could easily have been talking about her own acting. Of all her theatrical influences, Mirren claims the painter Francis Bacon as her "great guru." Citing the book "Interviews with Francis Bacon," she said, "You have to learn technique. He describes how painful the process is. How you feel paralyzed, restricted, frustrated by it. You feel like you lost your early instinctive inspiration. You have to learn it to forget it." She went on, "Sometimes you just can't get there. Other times, you're there without thinking." In Adrian Noble's 1982 Stratford production of "Antony and Cleopatra," in which she starred opposite Michael Gambon, Mirren felt that she'd reached the pinnacle of "making it live anew almost every night." When she didn't win the Laurence Olivier Award for her performance, she left the country. "I thought, Fuck it, that's it, they obviously don't want me," she said, in Ivan Waterman's 2003 book "Helen Mirren: The Biography." "They don't like me. They hate what I do. I'll go somewhere else. I wasn't being asked to do any work in England. Suddenly, Hollywood was a way of saying, 'Fuck you, England.' "

Mirren wasn't immediately happy in California. "I felt like a fish out of water," she said. "I was invisible, and really lost my identity as a British theatre actress." In film, she claims to have felt for a long time like "a rabbit in the headlights." Her technical breakthrough came on Peter Weir's "The Mosquito Coast," in 1986. "I was working with a lot of children and I thought, I'm just gonna use this experience to make myself feel free," she said. "I'm not gonna worry where the camera is. Of course, it drove Peter Weir around the twist, because I was always wandering out of shot. My desire was to learn not to care about the camera." Mirren added, "That's where your technique, as Francis Bacon says, supports you. You don't even think about it anymore. You recognize the good accident. You allow the accident to happen." For one scene in Nicholas Hytner's "The Madness of King George," Mirren—as the loving consort to the King (Nigel Hawthorne), Queen Charlotte—was sitting on the edge of George's bed, laughing about the events of the day. "In the middle of the take, Helen suddenly ducked down and bit his belly," Hytner recalled. "The cameraman was there, and it's in the film. She just went for it. He loved it. You know—if you're the director—that that's going to pay dividends right through the film: a moment that just says how necessary they are for each other. So that, when you rip them apart, it's heartbreaking." Hytner added, "Helen immediately identified that woman's unconditional love for her husband, her physical ease with him. Of the actors I know, she is the one for whom the emotion love is most easily coupled with physical desire. That was a kind of revelation. It became the heart of the film."

We were well past San Clemente before anybody on the train took notice of Mirren. Then the conductor—a short bleached-blond woman named Marcie, with a nose ring and a tattoo on her wrist—asked if it was O.K. to take a photograph. "That'd be fine," Mirren said. Marcie handed me her camera phone and slid in beside Mirren, who promptly took off Marcie's blue Amtrak cap and put it on her own head. They leaned in close. I snapped the picture and held the viewfinder up for Mirren's inspection. "It's not very good," she said. "Make sure we're in the center." The sec-



"You're confirmed for Sunday at 5:30 A.M. in your bed, sound asleep."



"At the first sign of trouble, he runs right back to his first wife."

ond shot worked. "I love your hat," Mirren said. "It's done a few miles, hasn't it?"

At the track, Hackford explained his system for betting—a complicated equation of running times, track conditions, jockeys, trainers' and owners' rankings, horses' earnings, and claiming prices. He favored the quinella—a wager that required picking the first- and second-place horses, which had a bonanza payout if you hit it. "It's almost impossible to win," he said, "but, when you do, you feel like a god."

"Taylor and I live a very parsimonious life," said Mirren, who, according to her sister, could "use a tea bag twice." In L.A., she rents an economy car; except for the occasional gourmet birthday treat, she said, "I go for cheap." As she stood at the betting window for the first race, her tightfistedness was apparent. "I'm a two-dollar bettor, so there's no gain, but also no pain," she said. She put her money on Lockitup. The horse promptly romped first around the six furlongs and earned her almost seven dollars, paying for her next bet. By the third race, all her lessons forgotten, Mirren was flying blind. "I bet what the guy in front bet," she said. The fourth race featured a six-to-one shot called Royal Cheer, which she resisted. By the seventh race, a certain wistfulness had crept into her excitement. "Oh, God, here we go," she said to Hackford, as the horses were being eased into their gates. "I arrived with such optimism. Can I borrow your glasses?" Hackford, already bent over his calculations for the next race, handed her his binoculars without looking up. The race began. Mirren stood with the field glasses trained in the direction of her horse, a ten-to-one shot. "Take off the end, baby," Hackford said. Mirren glanced quizzically at him, then at the binoculars; the lens caps were still on. Mirren's horse finished third. "I won nine dollars on the last bet, Tay," she said, when she returned from the betting window. "Because I'm doing it across the board." "Good luck, baby," Hackford, who was not having much success, said. "Really, really good luck." In the ninth race, Hackford finally won the quinella.

On the way back from the track, Mirren sat by herself as the train sped along the Pacific shoreline, past bonfires, waving children, surfers bobbing like seals on the glistening swells. The sun dipped below the horizon and cast a tangerine glow against the sky. "Incredible sunset," she said. "Glorious." After a while, she added, "The ease of American life. The blessing."

Mirren's London home is a former customs house, near Tower Bridge, on the cobbled backstreets of East London. Her front door looks out over a communal garden—the southeast corner is allotted to her peonies—that is the only garden on the Thames; in the days of sailing ships, it was a loch that led to an inland cove. All that remains from that era are a few black steel pylons along the edge of the greensward, where the big ships used to tie up. Mirren loves this garden and the sense of community with her fellow-gardeners. The gardening of her private space, however, sometimes requires some prompting. There is a large note fixed to her kitchen window: "Don't Forget to Water Me! I'm outside this window!"

On a glistening early-August morning, in a blue-and-white striped boatneck jersey, bluejeans, and espadrilles, she headed off to a small basement dubbing studio on Wardour Street, in Soho, for a looping session, one of her last days of work as "Prime Suspect" 's Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison. "You can't go on," Mirren said, explaining her decision to end the series. "I think I've gone on probably too long anyway."

"Prime Suspect" was the first British police procedural to put a woman's professional and psychological life squarely center stage. Over the years, Mirren had often complained publicly of the paucity of great female roles. "There isn't a 'King Lear' for women, or a 'Henry V' or a 'Richard III,' " she said. "Prime Suspect" was a far cry from Shakespeare; nonetheless, her translation of the part into something iconic had to do with her Shakespearean expertise—her ability to transform herself into people who, as Hytner pointed out, "are larger than life, speak better than life, feel more deeply than life." He added, "She can take someone like Jane Tennison and speak for a whole generation."

"Prime Suspect" introduced Mirren to a wider American public; in England, where it attracted more than fourteen million viewers, the show also reintroduced her to the British public, from whom she'd been absent during her California years. ("Helen is the Queen in exile," Adrian Noble said.) Before "Prime Suspect," female detective shows ("Dempsey and Makepeace" in the U.K.; "Cagney & Lacey" in the U.S.) had aped the male action formulas. "Prime Suspect" 's creator, Lynda La Plante, looked scrupulously at psychology and criminology and took her story into new areas of sexual politics as well as of crime detection. In the series, many professional women found a metaphor for their frustration. "They had put up with it for twenty years and none of them had been able to complain publicly about anything because it would have been the death of their careers," Mirren told the press. "Suddenly, there on the screen was a woman who was saying, 'Screw you.' A yell went up from all the women in all the professions, saying, 'Yes, that's exactly what it's like.' " So far, "Prime Suspect" has won twenty-seven awards, including three Emmys for best miniseries and one, in 1996, for its star.

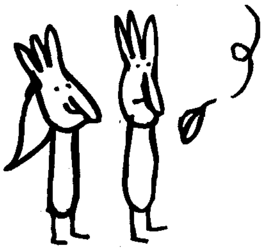
Mirren was the only actress to whom the producers of the series offered the part, back in 1991. Aspects of her emotional profile made her a natural fit for Tennison. Both were smart, independent, and ambitious; both were feminists who liked the company of men; both were Bolshie victims and survivors of the era's sexual politics. "Women are taught to smile, to be pleasant, to be charming, to be attractive. To say things like 'You're a darling—thank you so much.' They get their way like that," Mirren told reporters. "Tennison doesn't do that. She is driven, obsessive, vulnerable, unpleasantly egotistical, and confused. But she is damn good at what she does and is totally dedicated." To me, Mirren explained, "Jane's really weird for me, because I never think about her, not for one second. Of all the characters I've ever played, Jane is the one I've most allowed just to be. I walk out on the set and let it happen."

Looping is a cleaning-up exercise for already taped footage—fixing sound glitches, misspoken or mistimed words, and adding a fine filigree of vocal nuance. It's painstaking, tedious work, a sort of aural equivalent of needlepoint. When it was time to start, Mirren positioned herself on a stool with the pages to be corrected on a music stand in front of her, about two feet from the screen. The sound engineer watched through a window to her left, lobbing in comments over a microphone; behind her, on a sofa, sat the season's director, Philip Martin. "There's a kind of visceral, let's-just-do-it-and-think-about-it-later quality to Tennison and to Helen," he said. "She likes to work quickly." And so it proved.

Donning red-framed eyeglasses, Mirren set to work picking through the dialogue and rerecording it—sometimes adding a word, sometimes a mumble, sometimes improvising half sentences or exclamations so that the lines landed better in the scene. She was meticulous and exacting. After each fix, she folded the script page and put it to the side of the podium. With her little nips and tucks, Tennison and the plot became more vivid. At one point, when Tennison came to a door and flashed her I.D., she said, "Mrs. Philips, I'm Detective Jane Tennison." Mirren spoke the line, then turned to us. "Probably the last time I'll ever say that," she said.

Later, Mirren had to rerecord the lyrics to "Be My Baby," which Tennison sang and danced to in a scene set in her childhood home, where she returned on an errand while her father was dying in the hospital. (The song was changed in the final version of the episode.) In the dubbing studio, with her headphones on, Mirren swayed and sang. "She comes in very strong and hard and sometimes provocative," Martin said afterward of Mirren's dramatic attack; the dancing scene was a transfixing example. On the screen, Tennison bopped by herself with all the joy of a sixteen-year-old experiencing the song for the first time, then by degrees collapsed into a drunken, exhausted sleep on her childhood bed. With those few seconds of unexpected delight, which only compounded the scene's sadness, Mirren transformed the sentimental into something poetic. "When she hits the bull's-eye," Hytner told me, "it takes on a mythic resonance."

Earlier in the morning, one of "Prime Suspect" 's executive producers, Andy Harries, had made an official call on Mirren in the dubbing studio. "That's a fabulous line you've got: 'Don't call me "Ma'am," I'm not the bloody Queen!' " he said, of one of Tennison's speeches. "We're gonna put that in the trailer." The line resonated nicely, of course, with Mirren's career; however, it was her delivery of another bit of dialogue that seemed to carry the most haunting personal weight. Asked, by a teen-ager, what had made her become a police detective, Tennison replied, "It was the power. The freedom. And the stupid thought you could do some good."



Mirren's achievements have come at the price of a certain world-weariness. At our first meeting in California, we trudged up the cantilevered steps behind her house, following a sort of nature trail past an olive grove and lemon trees, until we arrived at a plateau high above the house, where, beneath an arbor of ancient cedars, two weathered green chairs were positioned with all of Los Angeles spread out below them. "I'm in a slightly weird place just now," Mirren said. "Of not being sure I ever want to work again. I want to refind the desire to pretend to be somebody." In what she calls her "Russian moments," when she feels "that somehow there's something between you and life, you don't know how to get out there and participate," acting has always been what pulls her back into experience. "It feeds the other side of my Russianness, which is emotional and passionate," she said. Gazing out over the brilliant horizon, Mirren got to thinking about the many changes in her life—changes of fortune and of family. Among the biggest, she told me, was the change in her attitude toward acting. "I've lost my idealism," she said. "I lost my sense of vocation—that you were fulfilling a serious and necessary function in your culture. It just very slowly slipped away." Mirren went on, "It was a fabulous liberation just to be venal and practical and not fucking holy about it. It's a bit of work and a bit of dosh. It was all so angst-ridden. I think I'm a better actor for it. I'm not saying I don't take it seriously; I do. But pomposity has gone out of the enterprise."

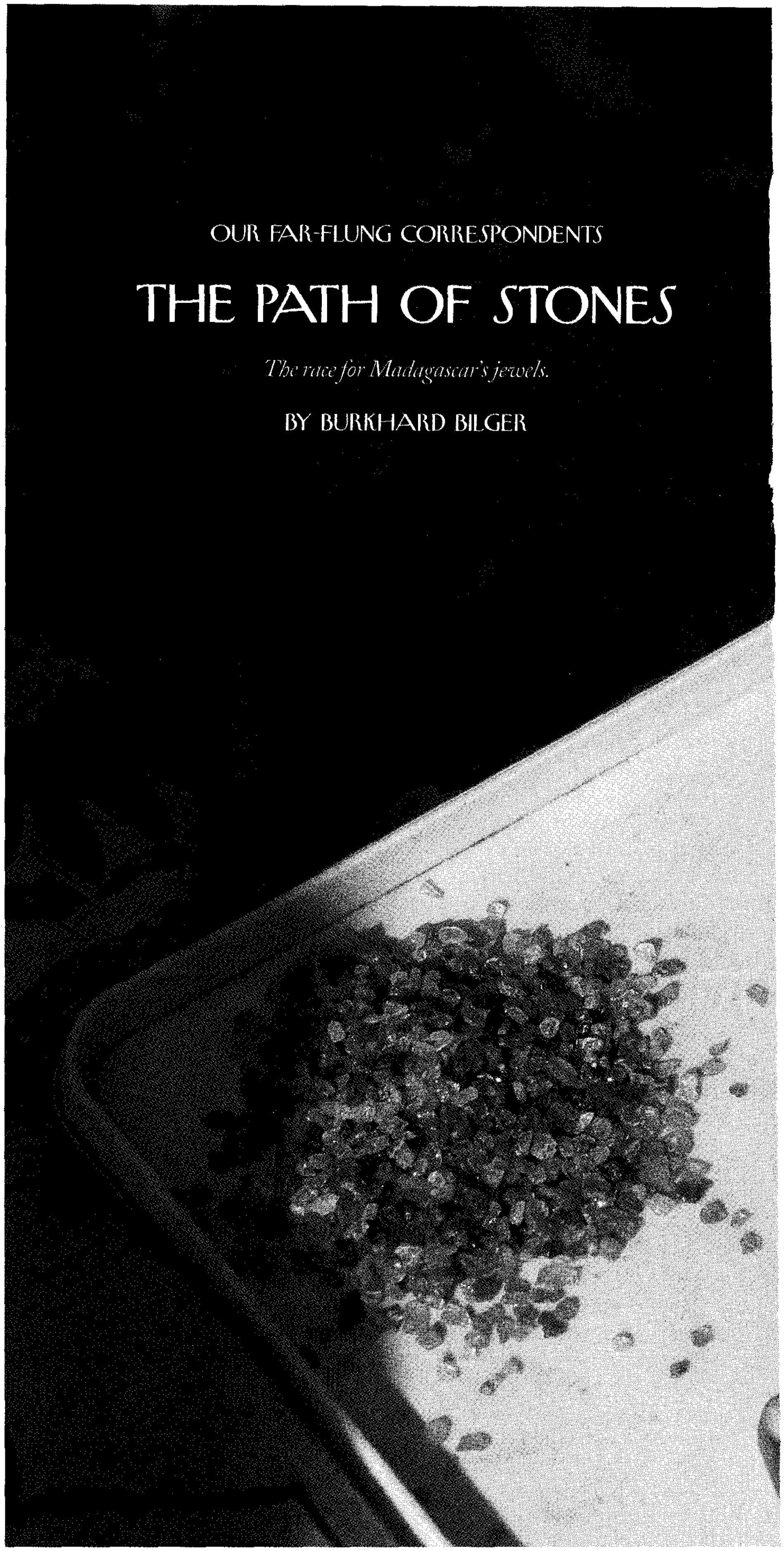
She glanced out toward the Pacific, where sailboats speckled the skyline, then she looked back at me. "I didn't want to sublimate my ego, my vanity," she said. "You know that kind of ensemble feeling—'We're all in this together.' No, actually, we're not all in this together. I am the queen. I am the star, and, you know, suck it up." Just as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she was modifying them. "Except, I don't behave like that at work," she said. "I'm no Ethel Merman." ♦

OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

THE PATH OF STONES

The race for Madagascar's jewels.

BY BURKHARD BILGER



A gem seller sorting through rough sapphires in Ilakaka, Madagascar. When buses pass throug

Every afternoon in the hilltop capital of Antananarivo, Madagascar, in the shadow of the arcade that borders the Avenue de l'Indépendance, four or five men can be found sitting on the porch of the Papangoo restaurant. There may be an Italian, an Israeli, and a few Malagasy among them, all lounging in rattan chairs and sipping coffee, waiting to see what business the day may bring. Out in the street, oxcarts and rickshaws jostle for position with half-century-old Citroëns. Buses crawl forward like centipedes, a hundred arms waving from their windows. On the sidewalk, boys with high-pitched voices hawk vanilla beans, trailing sweet clouds behind them. Now and then, a young man still dusty from the countryside will peel away from the crowd and approach one of the men under the arcade. He'll mumble a few words or flash a yellow-toothed grin, then put his hand in his pocket and pull out a small white box with something glimmering inside.

Tom Cushman sat at a window just inside the restaurant one summer day, watching the other gem dealers dicker and trade. He ate the last bite of his zebu steak and cleared some space in the middle of the table. Then he pulled a bulging, gallon-size Ziploc bag from his leather satchel and dumped its contents on the tablecloth. "Colored Stones 101," he said. He ran his fingers over the gems—a few hundred maralambo garnets in the rough, as dull and misshapen as half-eaten sourballs—and plucked a large one from the pile. He held it up to the sunlight so that its interior glowed a deep magenta. "Rule No. 1," he said. "Pick a pretty color." He threw the stone back on the pile and selected another. Its color was similar to the first's but less rich, like watered-down port. Worse, a hairline crack ran through the heart of it. "Clarity," Cushman said. "It has to be clean. If you give a jewel with an obvious flaw, what the fuck kind of love do you expect in return?"

He shovelled the garnets back into the bag, ignoring one that fell to the floor and skittered under a table. He had thousands more like it, he said. Madagascar has some of the richest and least exploited gem deposits on earth, and Cushman has made a comfortable living from the disparity. Since coming to the island from Chicago, fifteen years

akaka, they roll up the windows and don't stop, for fear of bandits. Photograph by Samantha Appleton.*

ago, he has worked at nearly every level of the local gem industry: as a mine owner, a gem dealer, and the founder of the country's only gemological institute. When huge deposits of ruby and sapphire were found several years ago, Cushman was one of the first dealers to venture into the often violent mining towns. That week, he was travelling to Ilakaka, the site of the greatest sapphire rush in recent history.

"If Daniel Boone were alive today, he'd be a gem dealer," he told me. "They are the guys who just won't stay home, who want to live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse. Then not die." Cushman, who is fifty-two, says things of this sort a lot. A decade and a half in a former French colony has only made him seem more American. He has wide, square shoulders, a swaggering walk, and graying hair that he wears somewhat long, like an aging detective in an Elmore Leonard novel. His English is full of bullet points and tough-guy aphorisms; his French has no room for fluty vowels or frilly idioms. "*Je suis serieux comme une crise de coeur!*" he'll say ("I'm as serious as a heart attack!"), leaving the locals a little startled and concerned for his health.

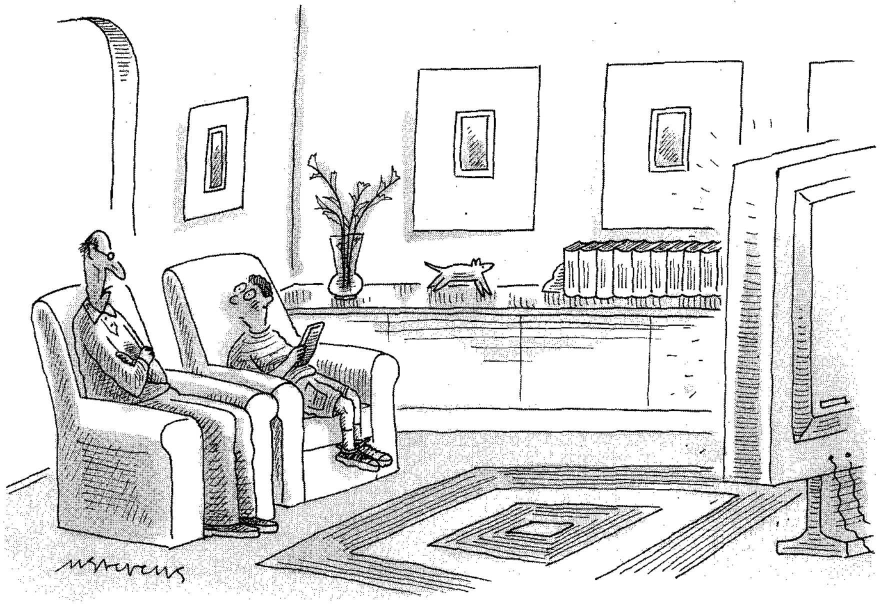
As we were eating, a Malagasy boy appeared at our table, holding a box with five mandarin garnets. Cushman angled them into the sun so that their facets gave off an effervescent orange light—"Fanta orange," he called it. Then he slipped the box into his coat pocket and told the boy they'd talk later.

"Secret knowledge," Cushman said, turning back to his dessert. "That's the heart of it." It's easy to tell a pretty stone from an ugly one, but knowing which is a garnet and which a piece of glass, which is worth five dollars and which five thousand, takes a practiced eye and a grasp of things unseen: geology, optics, the next fashion cycle. Gem dealing is one of the last of the ancient trades to be dragged into the modern world, and Madagascar is one of the few places where it can still be plied with abandon. "It's great," Cushman had told me before I came. "There's murder, claim-jumping, sex, violence, scandal, corruption. You'll love it."

Madagascar is old dirt, Cushman liked to say. Its gem deposits are even richer and more ancient than its animal life, and both have been preserved by its isolation. Some two hundred million years ago, the island was a piece of Gondwanaland lodged between what is now East Africa and India. When the supercontinent was torn apart by plate tectonics, Madagascar splintered off into the Indian Ocean and came to rest roughly three hundred miles off the coast of southern Africa, where it floated free of human inhabitants until around two thousand years ago. It was a lost world: a thousand miles long and three hundred and fifty miles wide, with mountains pleated down its length like the folds in a map. (If you could grab it by its shores and pull, Cushman quipped, Madagascar would flatten to the size of Australia.) It had rain forests to the east, savannas to the west, spiny deserts to the south, and countless hidden valleys and microenvironments where evolution could play, undisturbed, at inventing species.

When the first humans arrived, they found pygmy hippos, giant jumping rats, and elephant birds ten feet tall. They found screaming geckos, gorilla-size lemurs, and baobab trees that seemed to grow upside down, their roots in the air. Eighty-five per cent of Madagascar's plants, nearly all its reptiles, and half its birds existed nowhere else in the world, but the new settlers were even more exotic, in their way. Instead of paddling over from East Africa, they'd come from Malaysia and Indonesia, skirting the coasts in open boats or outrigger canoes—a journey of more than four thousand miles. "This strikes me as the single most astonishing fact of human geography," the physiologist and geographer Jared Diamond once wrote. "It's as if Columbus, on reaching Cuba, had found it occupied by blue-eyed, blond-haired Scandinavians speaking a language close to Swedish."

The Malagasy proceeded to kill off the island's giant creatures and replace them with cows. They planted rice, practiced sorcery, worshipped the dead, and invented a language of unequalled syllabic exuberance. (One eighteenth-century king was named Andrianampoinimerinandriantsimitoviaminandriampanjaka.) What they didn't do was dig for gems. Geologically, Madagascar was part Asia and part Africa, with some of the riches of both. The far north had basaltic sapphires, formed in volcanoes. The eastern escarpment had emeralds, deposited by superheated waters that broke through the earth's crust when the mountains were formed. The central highlands had pegmatites: veins of hardened magma studded with aquamarines, tourmalines, and other rare minerals. There were rubies as red as those in Sri Lanka, garnets as green as those in Kenya's Tsavo National Park, and some stones, like flaming-pink pez-



"When I was a boy, I had to walk five miles through the snow to change the channel."

zottaite, that could be found almost nowhere else. "Practically the whole island is gemmiferous," Cushman said. "If you fall out of an airplane, land on the ground, and start digging, you're going to find something."

Still, the locals couldn't be bothered with mining—even for gold, which they much preferred to gems. When Arab and Portuguese traders arrived, around A.D. 800 and 1500, they clung to the coast. And when the French colonized the country, in 1896, they didn't have the roads or the manpower to prospect more than a fraction of it. By 1960, when the Malagasy finally regained their independence, so many forests had been logged for hardwood or burned for rice farming that the rivers were red with eroded soil. But the island's gems were largely untouched.

A few months before flying to Madagascar, I met Cushman at a gem show in Las Vegas. The show, hosted by the Gem and Lapidary Dealers Association at the Mirage hotel, had attracted more than five hundred exhibitors and fifteen thousand buyers, and there was an even larger show across the street, at the Venetian. When we walked into the Mirage's Events Center, its ninety thousand square feet of exhibition space held gems of every color. In the past decade alone, I'd heard, fine rubies had been found in Greenland, diamonds in the Canadian Arctic, and green tashmarines in China's mountainous Xinjiang Province. Cushman swept his arm around with an ironic grin. "And you thought this shit was rare!" he said.

Yet the show's abundance was deceptive. The earth's supply of stones may be inexhaustible, but people have been digging for gems since the Stone Age, and the most accessible deposits have been picked clean. As Cushman and I went from dealer to dealer ("It's Mr. Madagascar!" they'd shout), we kept hearing the same story: the old mines were played out, the new ones disappointing. India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—long among the largest colored-gem producers in the world—were shifting their business to cutting and treating, and other countries were close behind. "Two years ago, we would go to the field and see sixty to eighty people," an opal dealer from Australia told us. "Last time, I only bought from eight. Nobody's got anything." Cushman nodded, adding, "It's like a buddy of mine says: We're looking for things that aren't lost."

The colored-gem market isn't controlled by one company, the way diamonds are largely controlled by De Beers. Most gem deposits are too small to justify mechanized mining. The digging is done by locals with picks and shovels, and the stones are bought by independent dealers like Cushman, who travel from dig to dig. The smaller stones usually wind up in Asian factories, where they're cut to standardized sizes, set in jewelry, and often sold to large discount retailers or the home-shopping networks. But large stones are still finished one by one, and bought by jewellers who haggle over every hundredth of a carat. In Las Vegas, there were Nigerians with purple garnets, Finnish dealers with green and gold beryls, and a man from Tennessee who harvested pearls from river mussels. When we passed a Sri Lankan sapphire dealer, Cushman stopped and asked to see his hands. "See?" he said, pointing to the thick calluses on the man's palms, the results of his wielding a pickaxe. "This guy actually works."

Gem dealing tends to run in families, each generation initiating the next and passing on some stones to get the process started. The dealers in Manhattan's jewelry district are often third- or fourth-generation, and in Germany the legacies can stretch back to the Middle Ages. Cushman wasn't so lucky. Nothing in his background, he said, would suggest a taste for "this Sinbad the Sailor stuff that's been going on for two thousand years." His father was a nuclear engineer in Idaho Falls; his mother was a homemaker with a gift for the mechanical—when the last of her eight children started high school, she went to a vocational institute and learned to rebuild car engines.

Cushman was an indifferent student. It took him nine years to earn a degree in marketing from Idaho State, and then he had no idea what to do with it. He worked as a waiter, a ski instructor, a concert promoter, and a seller of irrigation pipe. "I was afraid I'd end up the assistant night manager of a bar-and-grill," he said. He had three vague but compelling job priorities: to travel for a living, to make better money than he did selling farm supplies, and to have a job sexy enough to impress women at bars. Gem dealing seemed to satisfy these criteria. So in 1985 Cushman enrolled in a graduate program at the Gemological Institute of America, in New York. He was thirty-one.

Five years later, he first got word of Madagascar. He was managing a jewelry store outside Chicago by then, and had flown to Bangkok to buy gems wholesale. A dealer he knew from Iowa, Michael Couch, was in town at the same time, so the two of them met for beers in the night-club district, at a bar called the Four Queens. Cushman told Couch that he liked his job but he was getting restless: he wanted to do more than sell jewelry. He wanted to follow the stones to their source, to buy them before they were cut. "He said he was looking to get into rough and needed someone who could teach him how to read it," Couch recalled. "He kept saying, 'Where can I hit a home run, Couch? Where can I hit a home run?' "

Couch, as it happened, had a pretty good idea. Earlier that year, at a gem show in Tucson, he had joined a poker game one night at the local Holiday Inn. Among the players were some Brazilian crystal exporters, as well as a geologist who tracked the gem trade for the federal government, and late at night they began to discuss a favorite topic: What was the next undiscovered country for gems? Couch had been one of the first Americans to buy stones in East Africa, where large deposits of rubies, sapphires, and tanzanite were discovered in the nineteen-sixties, but his territory was getting crowded. If you could go to one place and one place only, he asked the geologist, which would it be? "Madagascar," the man said. "It's got everything, and nobody goes there."

When Cushman and Couch arrived on the island, in January of 1991, they had about thirty thousand dollars between them. Neither had any contacts or specific knowledge of the local gem market. Neither knew much about the area's geology or the quality of its stones. "We were pigeons," Cushman says.

Madagascar had only a handful of foreign dealers in those days, most of them West Africans. The Malagasy dealers tended to hang out at the train station in Antananarivo, or near the old French beryl mines in Antsirabe, at the center of the country. Sapphires and rubies had yet to be discovered, so the miners sold mostly semiprecious stuff—beryl, tourmaline, amethyst, and the like—with more than a few fakes mixed in. To simulate aquamarines, local swindlers would cut up the glass insulators from power lines, which happened to have a pretty, pale-blue color. To simulate emeralds, they'd take crystals of clear quartz, glaze them green, and roll them in epoxy and flakes of black mica, a common host material for emeralds in the rough. Most of the fakes were easy to spot—the "aquamarines," for instance, often had tiny bubbles inside them from the glassmaking process. The hard part was pricing the real stones.

Walter Schumann's classic handbook "Gemstones of the World" lists sixty-five well-known gems and thirty-nine more obscure stones, each with its own peculiar properties. A stone's value is said to be a factor of three virtues: beauty, rarity, and durability. A gem without beauty is just a rock, but even a beautiful rock can be too soft or common to be a gem. (Cushman once showed me a lovely shard of amber-colored rough; "beerite," he called it, in honor of the bottle from which it came.) Gemologists rate gems on a scale of one to ten in terms of hardness—diamonds are a ten, rubies and sapphires a nine, opals a six, turquoise a five, amber a two—and they tend to pay a premium for red, green, and blue stones.

The final value is both mathematically precise and largely subjective. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds tend to fetch the highest prices, so they're known as "precious gems," but their status is largely a matter of tradition. Tsavorite garnets are harder, clearer, and rarer than emeralds, and their green can be equally intense, yet they go for half the price. Spinels are rarer than rubies and so similar that no one could tell the difference until the nineteenth century. (The Black Prince's Ruby in the British Imperial State Crown is really a spinel.) Yet spinels are called semiprecious and rubies are among the most expensive stones in the world. Prices can go up or down depending on what colors are in vogue—some dealers talk to fabric-makers to get a jump on the trends—or on what celebrities are wearing. When Ben Affleck gave Jennifer Lopez a pink diamond ring, a few years ago, prices for pink stones shot up. As one dealer put it, "In the gem business, we have very little sausage. It's all sizzle."

Cushman had a pretty good eye for cut stones, but rough added a new set of variables to the equation. The stones that the miners showed him and Couch would lose about eighty per cent of their weight to cutting, and what was left would determine the dealers' margin. Could they get two four-carat rings out of a stone, or just a six-carat pendant? Did the cleanest part of the stone also have the best color? Couch knew some of the answers, but he'd never worked with Malagasy stones. He didn't know how brittle they were when cut, for instance, or how they might respond to various treatments.

"We bought some stuff that was just junk," Cushman said. They started in Antananarivo and worked their way south. They set up for business at a Vietnamese café in Antsirabe, befriended another American dealer (he later got into a drunken brawl with Couch), and after two weeks managed to buy one spectacular stone: a fist-size hunk of pink morganite. Cut and sold, it just covered their expenses.

Couch bought a stake in a cutting shop in Thailand after that, but Cushman kept going back to Madagascar. "Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other," he said, quoting Benjamin Franklin. During the next few years, he divided his time between the island and the United States, loading up on rough, having it cut back home or in Asia, and selling it at gem conventions or to his network of retailers. It took him about eight trips to know what he was doing, he says, and even then he didn't get rich. The margins were good, but there were too few miners to provide a steady flow of spectacular stones.

Then, in August of 1998, a Malagasy dealer named Azziz showed Cushman a matchbox full of brilliant pink stones. They had been found by some garnet miners, he said, near a place called Ilakaka. Azziz had told the miners that they were "peach-blossom garnets"—a term he made up on the spot—but he and Cushman knew better: they were pink sapphires, as beautiful as any in the world. Within a month, Cushman was loading up his car for an extended trip south. Within a year, a hundred thousand Malagasy had joined him.

The sapphire mines of Ilakaka lie in the southern plains, a five-hour drive from the seaside town of Toliara, along a cracked and buckled road that runs up the spine of the country. On the day of our trip, Cushman packed his loupes and scopes, his cribbage board, and a ragged sheaf of ten million Malagasy ariary—about five thousand U.S. dollars. He also had a .32-calibre revolver in a purple fanny pack around his waist. "It's Wild West down here, boys," he said, as we got into his van.

The road rose slowly from the coast, toward the wind-scoured Horombe Plateau. It passed through prickly-pear deserts and dry forests, over vast grasslands marked by towering baobab trees, and sandstone canyons banded oxide red and chalky white. The landscape had a post-apocalyptic quality, with people reduced to vanishing points on the horizon or clustered in ramshackle towns along the road.

We passed two boys playing with a chameleon they'd caught. It was crouched on a stick, its skin gone gray and black with anger. We passed some shirtless youths herding cattle on foot, carrying shotguns to discourage rustlers. We passed women squatting in front of huts, selling bags of charcoal made from some of the last of the local trees. Many were wearing cast-off clothes from Western countries—tokens of charity that had partially crippled the local clothing industry. Cushman called this the Law of Unintended Consequences.

"These people are cursed," he said. "First, they had the French, who are not the world's best colonial administrators. Then, after they finally won their independence, they got this guy Ratsiraka, who wrote his own little red book of So-

"You have a club—use it."

• •

cialist philosophy," he said. In 1960, Mauritius, Malaysia, and Madagascar were all among the world's poorest countries. "Now," Cushman continued, "Malaysia has one of the tallest buildings in the world and Mauritius is one of the richest countries in Africa. Madagascar has hardly changed." Nearly three-quarters of the island's nineteen million inhabitants live on less than a dollar a day, most of them on subsistence farms with thin, eroded soils full of clay. A series of attempted coups and corrupt governments had driven off foreign aid and investors until recently, and tourism had yet to recover. Nearby Mauritius receives close to a million visitors a year; Madagascar gets less than a hundred and fifty thousand, despite its astonishing landscape. "This country is poor, poor, poor, poor," Cushman said. "Fucking poor."

Gemstones seemed the obvious remedy, but the Malagasy still lacked the expertise and the infrastructure to truly profit from them. A third of the people couldn't read or write, and few knew anything about gems. The roads were bad, the export laws punitive, the customs officials often dishonest. (Officially, Madagascar exports about thirty million dollars in gems every year, but more than double that amount is thought to leave in smugglers' pockets.) For now, it was just an island of part-time miners. In the wet season, from December through April, the Malagasy planted rice, vanilla, or cassava, and grazed their bony zebu on land too poor to bear crops. When the harvests were in, they headed for the mines. Much of the land was publicly owned and the sapphires lay close to the surface, available to anyone who filed a claim. "What have they got to lose?" Cushman said. "All they need is a shovel."

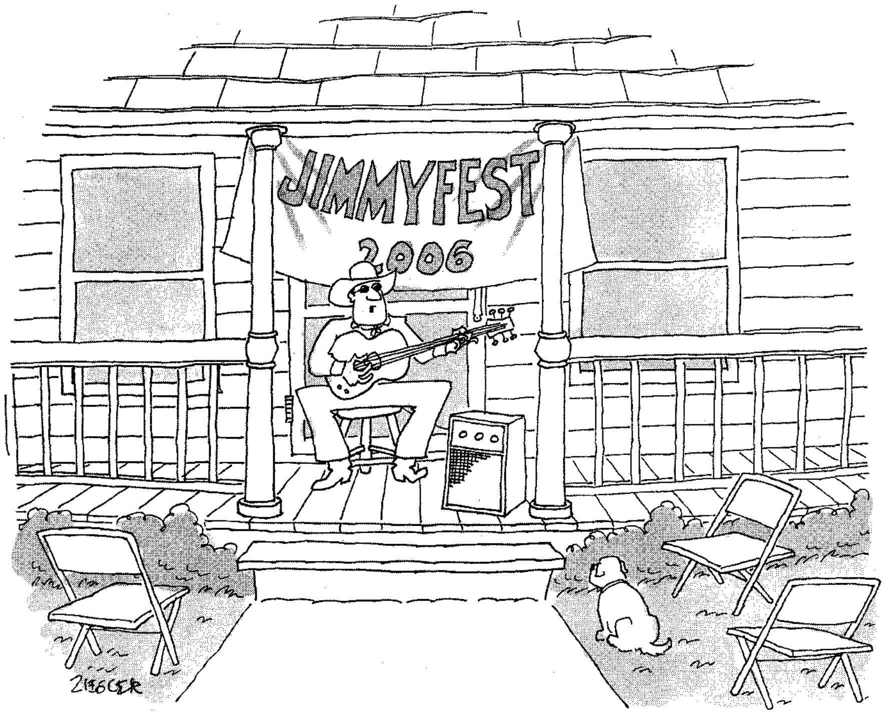
By the time we reached the mines, night had fallen. To the east, beneath the gray outlines of the Isalo Massif, the hills glowed orange with range fires. Most of the villages had gone dark along the road—about eighty per cent of the country lived without electricity, and gasoline was so precious that it was sold by the litre bottle in stands—but the mining towns had their own generators. "Jesus! Even *they're* making electricity!" Cushman shouted, as we passed a little community strung with what looked like Christmas bulbs. Then we topped a rise and caught sight of Ilakaka, lit like a burning cross in the desert.

At the entrance to town, a row of spikes had been set across half the road and two soldiers with semi-automatics were inspecting cars. We fell in behind a water truck from the coast that filled the city's cisterns twice a day. Then we crept through the crowds on the main drag, past bars, discos, drygoods and clothing stores, their counters open to the street like booths at a small-town carnival. Most of the buildings were patched together from wood and corrugated tin, but the nicest ones were made of brick. You could see their owners perched at counters inside: slender Thais and swarthy Sri Lankans, their faces illuminated by fluorescent lamps, peering at gems through loupes.

When tour buses pass through Ilakaka, I'd read, they roll up the windows and don't stop, for fear of bandits. I asked Cushman if he ever came into town at night. "No," he said. "And nobody I know has ever done it." We passed a car with four bullet holes in the windshield. We passed the home of a reputed gangster known as La Bombe. We were nearly at the center of town when a Malagasy man strolled up to the van and stuck his head inside the window. He had a cigar in his mouth, a Che Guevara beard, and teeth that gleamed nearly as brightly as the gold pendant around his neck. "*Ah, mon patron! Mon grand confrère!*" he shouted, reaching inside to grasp Cushman's hand. "It is so very good to see you!" Cushman grinned and introduced us. "This is my friend Jean-Noel," he said. "He owns the biggest mine in town. They call it the Swiss Bank."

Jean-Noel was forty-seven and had lived in Ilakaka for years. He said that you had to be clever to survive in this place—"*Il faut être malin*"—but he rarely let the effort show. He had a loose-jointed walk, a soft, musical voice, and the lit-up eyes of a con man or a holy fool. Before coming to Ilakaka, he studied engineering and telecommunications at the Polytechnical Institute of Madagascar. He ran an import-export business in Antananarivo, and made a very comfortable living by Malagasy standards. Yet as soon as sapphires were discovered he bought a car and headed south, leaving his wife and four children behind. By the time he met Cushman, in the fall of 1998, he had just enough money left to build a hut in Ilakaka and to buy a handful of sapphires. "At the beginning, everyone was mining and no one was buying," he said. "So I bought little stones and sold them, and then I went higher and higher." Within a year, he'd made enough to build three houses in town, which he rented out to miners and shopkeepers.

Cushman, meanwhile, had set up shop in Room 8 of the Orchidée, a hotel in nearby Ranohira. By day, he would drive to Ilakaka and buy sapphires from miners in a little booth that he'd built and christened La Maison Blanche—the White House. By night, he hung out at the hotel and played cribbage with his driver, a Malagasy named Fidy. At the height of the rush, Cushman would buy enough sapphires to fill a briefcase, fly to Singapore to meet an American investor who had fronted him fifty thousand dollars, and get a briefcase full of cash in return. "We had a tidy little thing going," he said.



Then, in the fall of 1999, the Thais and the Sri Lankans arrived. In their countries, gem dealing was both an ancient tradition and a modern industry: the Sri Lankans had mined sapphires for twenty-five hundred years; the Thais had perfected the art of treating and cutting them. In Ilakaka, as in gem-rush towns the world over, the two groups arrived en masse, with deep pockets and expert eyes for rough. The Thais came first and claimed the high end; the Sri Lankans arrived a few months later and settled for the middle range.

If Ilakaka once had too many diggers and not enough buyers, it now had too many buyers and not enough diggers. So Cushman switched sides. He found an area of productive mines near Ilakaka, staked a claim on some unbroken ground, and hired a dozen Malagasy miners. They spent the next two years sinking fourteen holes into the desert. Not one of the mines was profitable. "It wasn't an aggregate loss. It was every single one," Cushman said. "The best thing I found was a one-gram sapphire." Still, Cushman was at the mines every day, so he was often the first to hear when sapphires were found in neighboring pits. The miners weren't always eager to drive into town, so he often got stones at attractive prices. "I bought great shit," he said. "I bought fabulous shit. It got so that I was making more money walking around than I was digging."

By then, Jean-Noel had been forced into mining as well, but he made it easier on himself. He had a hut in Ilakaka, and Ilakaka seemed to have sapphires, so he dug his first pit in his own back yard. Like Cushman, he paid his miners about two dollars a day, plus food and medicine. When any gems were found, they were sold to a local dealer and a third of the money went to the miners.

"*C'est magnifique, n'est-ce pas?*" Jean-Noel asked when Cushman and I visited his mine one day. We were standing on the rim of an enormous pit, one of three that Jean-Noel's men had dug behind his house. It was about sixty feet square and five stories deep, with terraced sandstone walls that stepped down to a greenish pool below. "Here we found everything," Jean-Noel said. "Rubies, alexandrites, blue sapphires, pink sapphires—*Tous, tous, tous!* That is why they called it the Swiss Bank." By the time his miners

THE BIRTHING

Call out the names in the procession of the loved.
Call from the blood the ancestors here to bear witness
to the day he stopped the car,
we on our way to a great banquet in his honor.
In a field a cow groaned lowing, trying to give birth,
what he called *front leg presentation*,
the calf come out nose first, one front leg dangling from his mother.
A fatal sign he said while rolling up the sleeves
of his dress shirt, and climbed the fence.
I watched him thrust his arms entire
into the yet-to-be, where I imagined holy sparrows scattering
in the hall of souls for his big mortal hands just to make way.
With his whole weight he pushed the calf back in the mother
and grasped the other leg tucked up like a closed wing
against the new one's shoulder.
And found a way in the warm dark to bring both legs out
into the world together.
Then heaved and pulled, the cow arching her back,
until a bull calf, in a whoosh of blood and water,
came falling whole and still onto the meadow.
We rubbed his blackness, bloodying our hands.
The mother licked her newborn, of us oblivious,
until he moved a little, struggled.
I ran to get our coats, mine a green velvet cloak,
and his tuxedo jacket, and worked to rub the new one dry
while he set out to find the farmer.
When it was over, the new calf suckling his mother,
the farmer soon to lead them to the barn,
leaving our coats just where they lay
we huddled in the car.
And then made love toward eternity,
without a word drove slowly home. And loved some more.

—*Deborah Digges*

reached the water table, they had dug up five and a half pounds of sapphires alone, the largest of which weighed a hundred carats. Cushman laughed. "I dug fourteen holes and found nothing," he said. "You dug one and found El Dorado."

When the sapphires first started coming out of the Swiss Bank, word spread so quickly that Jean-Noel had to hire armed guards to protect the mine around the clock. In those early years of the rush, the horde of diggers and dealers had yet to impose order on themselves, and many carried guns. In 2001, three dealers were killed in the space of seven months, and the staff of the local Catholic Relief Services saw several people shot not far from their offices. "It was out of control," Cushman said. "In four days, I watched three rookies get robbed of between thirty and fifty thousand each. Just *pop, pop, pop*. You could hear gunfire every night."

At around that time, one of Cushman's favorite dealers, a literate young Malagasy named Thierry, bought a beautiful nine-gram sapphire that would have been worth about twenty thousand dollars once cut. "It was the score of his life," Cushman said. "He should have bought that stone and kept moving." Instead, Thierry stuck around for three days to celebrate. On the third night, a man walked into his house and shot him dead while he was eating dinner.

Then, as now, many of the robberies were blamed on La Bombe—"*comme bombe atomique*," Jean-Noel said—a fat, middle-aged Malagasy known as "*le chef des gangsters*." La Bombe apparently spent his time shuttling from sapphire town to sapphire town, with twenty or thirty henchmen following him around in black Nissan S.U.V.s. He was said to have the local authorities in his pocket, and had been arrested at least once without being convicted. "He got shot in 2000 but he didn't die, God damn it," Cushman said. "And if ever a man needed killing it's him. Now he hangs around outside the mining office where people have to declare their purchases and finds out who's got the good stuff."

La Bombe prided himself on his keen eye for prospecting, Cushman said, but he rarely started any digs of his own. Instead, he liked to approach the most successful miners in town and offer them "partnerships." Jean-Noel was among those he courted most insistently. "You see my beautiful car?" La Bombe said to him. "It's thanks to the great feeling I have for sapphires. If you work with me, you will share in that feeling." He wanted Jean-Noel to lend him twenty men or so to dig a mine, and some money to defray the cost of protecting it, but Jean-Noel told him that he always worked alone. "He said, 'Why not? You can be a billionaire with me,' " Jean-Noel recalled. "And I said, 'Better to stay the way I am than to become a billionaire with the blood of others.' "

Jean-Noel wasn't an easy target. He had relatives highly placed in the military, as well as bodyguards of his own. Eventually, though, his wealth proved too tempting to local bandits. "It was about two years ago, maybe in June," he recalled. "There was no moon. It was very dark." An hour or so after the city's lights had been switched off, a group of about twenty men crept down the dirt road that led to Jean-Noel's house. They were carrying Kalashnikov rifles, the police later told him, based on the bullet holes in his doorway, and once they were fifteen yards away they opened fire.

Two of Jean-Noel's bodyguards were asleep in a hut next door. When they heard the shots, they scrambled into a dry streambed behind the house and returned fire. Jean-Noel, meanwhile, grabbed his own rifle—an Italian-made Famars that he calls "a gun like the Mafia have"—and a bandolier with two hundred cartridges. He ran into the next room to get his nine-year-old son, Mihashy, who had just come down from Antananarivo. Then he fired a few shots through the window and joined his guards in the streambed. The two sides spent the next four hours exchanging gunfire. Jean-Noel's group was so well hidden in the dark that no one was hit, but it was midwinter and they were wearing only nightshirts in the cold. Mihashy didn't mind. "It was an adventure for him," Jean-Noel said. "I took him in one arm and shot with the other, and he screamed, '*Tirez, Papa! Tirez! N'ayez pas peur!*' " ("Shoot, Papa! Shoot! Don't be scared!")

When Jean-Noel told me the story, he was sitting in his living room, next to a satellite TV and a statue of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by framed pictures of his children. He had his shotgun out and was pantomiming the gunfight—"*Katcha! Katcha! Katcha!*"—and I got the feeling that his son wasn't the only one who found life in Ilakaka thrilling. Jean-Noel had long since made his fortune, and his wife was growing tired of living apart. "I need you," she had told him recently. "Lovers like us, it's not good to be separated for so long." But he still wasn't ready to leave. The Swiss Bank was played out, he said—the miners had found nothing but topaz lately—but he had an idea of where to look next.

He put on a pair of rimless glasses and pulled a book of geological maps from a shelf next to his bed. He opened it to a scale drawing of the local landscape and pointed to a long, serpentine formation. "You have to follow the *lalam-bato*," he said, tracing the fingernail of his forefinger down the length of it. "The path of stones."

Ilakaka's sapphires are alluvial deposits, left behind in ancient streambeds. They were forged in the earth's crust roughly half a billion years ago, thrust aboveground with the Isalo Mountains, and then washed onto the valley below. If you looked closely at the walls of the Swiss Bank, you could see thick bands of sand alternating with thin bands of gravel. The sand was deposited incrementally, by seasonal rains that carried light sediments down from the mountains. The gravel was dumped at much lengthier intervals, by massive floods that swept down onto the valley. Sapphires are even heavier than granite—miners can pan for them as they do for gold—so they're usually mixed in with the gravel. At the Swiss Bank, the deposits are around fifteen, thirty, fifty, and seventy-five feet below the surface, but deposits vary from site to site and are spread out over a thousand square miles.

Prospecting is a straightforward science in much of Madagascar. In the highlands, for instance, after a heavy storm you can sometimes spot pegmatites—the veins of hardened magma where aquamarines and other gems are found—washed clear by the rains. Or you can hike up an erosion gully and track bits of ruby or aquamarine back to their original deposits. In Ilakaka, those deposits were washed away hundreds of millions of years ago. To find the sapphires, it helps to see the landscape as it was then, and find the eddies and pools where the river dumped its stones. Satellite images and survey maps can narrow the search a little, but most strikes are a matter of dumb luck and sheer numbers. "It's like a bunch of chickens hunting for a grain of rice," Cushman said. "Sooner or later, someone gets a hit and then everyone goes there and you get a rush."

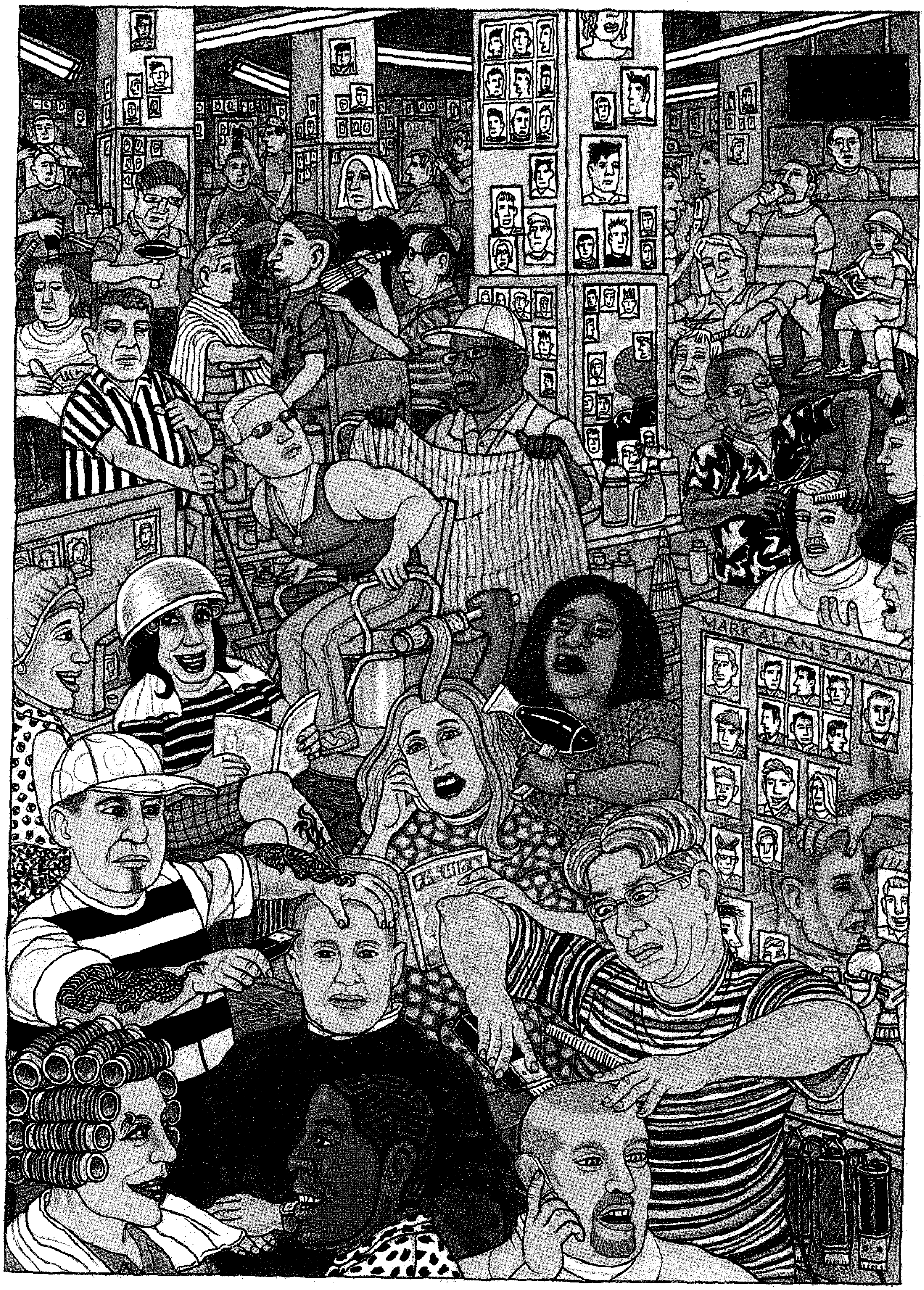
A few miles south of the Swiss Bank, next to a bend in the Ilakaka River, about a hundred miners and their families were working a vein about twenty-five feet belowground. They were mostly independents, though Jean-Noel had a small crew working there, too, and their haphazard digging had turned the site into a moonscape. Shallow pits large enough for three or four men were interspersed with deep shafts wide enough for one. The miners took turns lowering one another down with a wooden windlass, and sending buckets of earth back to the surface. The dirt was sifted by teen-agers with makeshift metal screens, then the gravel was taken to the water and panned for sapphires. The entire site reeked of human waste—abandoned pits served as toilets—and of fumes from the clattering pumps that kept river water out of the shafts.

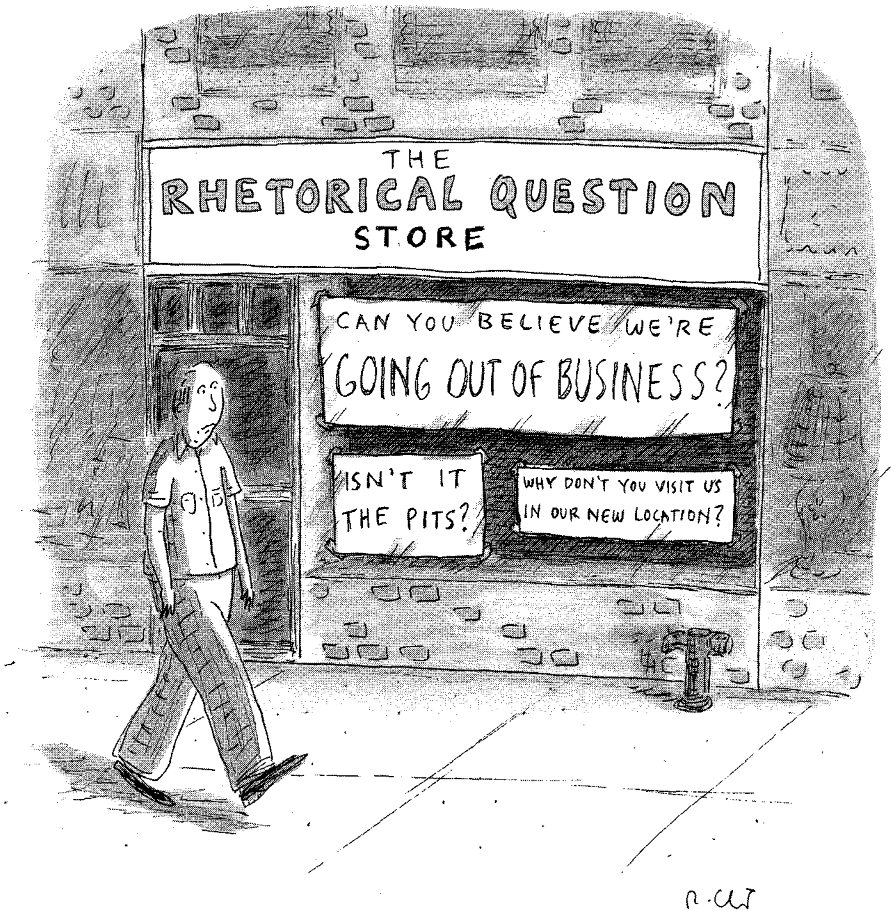
Cushman picked up a rock and dropped it down one of the empty pits at the site. A few seconds later, we heard a distant plop. "That's thirty-two feet per second, per second," he said. The site was riddled with tunnels belowground. The miners would dig down to a vein, then burrow horizontally to follow it, sometimes for three hundred yards or more. The technique was much more efficient than an open pit like the Swiss Bank, but also more dangerous: most of the tunnels were built without wooden bracings, in sandy soil prone to cave-ins. "There have been no deaths here yet, God bless us," Jean-Noel said. "But in other areas many collapse, many people are dead."

As we were talking, a woman named Estella came over to show Cushman some sapphires from her mine, on the other side of the hill. She had a more urbane look than the other dealers—bobbed hair, army vest, black bomber pants—but her stones were a little flat for Cushman's taste, and not of the deepest blue. "The best pieces they won't show you, because they're afraid of bandits," Jean-Noel said. Estella, as it turned out, was the owner of the car that we'd passed on our way into Ilakaka on the first night, the one whose windshield was pocked with bullet holes. It had been attacked that May, she told us, by eight men with guns who'd taken about five thousand dollars' worth of furs, money, and gems. She lifted her shirt to show us the two bullet-wound scars on her back. Her husband and baby had been with her in the car, she said, but they were unharmed.

Ilakaka was a "casino of life," Cushman said, yet most miners found the rewards worth the risk. Digging for sapphires was three to five times as profitable as farming, and the money worked its way through the community: a sapphire might change hands ten times before it reached a velvet display case in an American store. Cushman pointed to a pair of women talking down by the river. One was young and skinny, and wore a soiled blue T-shirt; the other, older and plumper, was dressed in a pink sundress and a straw hat, and she had a baby slung across her chest. As we watched, the younger one took a pill bottle and poured some sapphires onto a white plastic tray. "*Ramasseur*," Cushman said. Then he pointed to the older woman, who was running her fingers through the pink, blue, and lavender shards. "*Collecteur*," he said. The *ramasseurs*, or gatherers, bought stones from the miners, he explained, and sold them to the collectors. The collectors took them to town, where they were bought by another group known simply as "businessmen." The business-

BARBERSHOP BY MARK ALAN STAMATY


MARK ALAN STAMATY
FASHION


THE RHETORICAL QUESTION STORE
CAN YOU BELIEVE WE'RE GOING OUT OF BUSINESS?
ISN'T IT THE PITS?
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men sold them mostly to the Sri Lankans and the Thais, who sold them to exporters, who sold them to treaters, cutters, wholesalers, and retailers.

All told, about half a million Malagasy made some income off mining, but only a fraction did any digging. "That half million includes the hookers," Cushman said. One of the richest men in Ilakaka wasn't a miner or a dealer but an entrepreneur named Niry Maherlla. Early in the rush, he had driven into town with a freezer and a small generator in the back of his truck, and proceeded to sell cold beer to the diggers. He had since bought a bar, a disco, a radio station, and the two enormous Caterpillar generators that powered the city. "It's like the California gold rush," Cushman said. "They start to realize that mining the miners is more profitable than mining the dirt."

No one was better at mining the miners than the foreign dealers. Cushman paid about thirty dollars a carat for large, good-quality rough in Ilakaka, then cut and sold it for three or four times that price in Asia or the United States. He had no patience with those who called this exploitation. "You come down to Madagascar and live the way I live, take the risks that I take, take the shit I take, and tell me it ain't fair," he said. In a good year, he might make a hundred thousand dollars; far less than many jewellers. Yet he also knew that the Malagasy would never dig themselves out of poverty at this rate. To build a true gem industry, they had to learn to cut, treat, and sell stones directly to wholesalers—and stop selling rough to people like him.

In the winter of 2001, Madagascar had elected its first truly democratic government in three decades. The new President, Marc Ravalomanana, looked a bit like Frankie Avalon and was a believer in free trade. He began his career selling homemade yogurt from the back of a bicycle and went on to build a dairy empire. Ravalomanana was repairing the roads and trying to reform the customs system, liberalizing export laws and cracking down on smugglers. Most important, perhaps, foreign-aid groups had begun to invest in the country again. A year after the election, the World Bank announced a five-year, thirty-two-million-dollar project that was partly meant to help jump-start Madagascar's mining industry. One of its first acts was to hire Cushman to found and manage a gemology school.

Since Cushman's mines in Ilakaka went bust, he had gone back to dealing semiprecious stones, with only moderate success. Selling gems overseas, meanwhile, had become nearly as risky as working in Madagascar. Last year alone, more than a hundred and ten million dollars' worth of jewels was stolen from American dealers—a bigger haul than all the bank robberies in the United States that year combined—often by well-organized Colombian gangs. "I hardly know a single salesman who hasn't been followed, tracked, or robbed, some of them twice," Joe Menzie, the president of the International Colored Gemstone Association, told me.

Cushman had never been robbed, but his ex-wife had. In July of 2000, he had married Denise Walters, a gem dealer whom he had met at a show in Tucson. Four months later, Walters and a friend were on a sales trip in Southern California when they stopped at a Wienerschnitzel for a late lunch. They had just stepped inside when five men pulled up in a car without license plates, broke the back side windows of the car, and yanked out the suitcases containing Walters's jewels. "I swear to God, it took ten seconds," she told me. "They must have been following me for about three days." Walters ran out when she heard the noise, then ducked back inside when one of the men seemed to be going for a gun. By the time she came out again, the thieves had left with more than two hundred thousand dollars' worth of her merchandise—mostly pearls and diamond jewelry. Her insurance wouldn't cover the loss, because the jewels had been left unattended.

Walters later sank into a depression so deep that she rarely left the house, and the marriage slowly fell apart. (She has since recovered, and has opened a spa in Ketchum, Idaho.) Cushman's business survived, but he lost his appetite for long sales trips. "I am never going on the road again, ever," he told me. By the time the World Bank approached him, the prospect of an office job and a steady paycheck had begun to sound quite attractive.

Cushman now spends eight months of the year at the school and only four months dealing gems. He has a state-of-the-art lab and a cutting facility in Antananarivo, with about fifteen full-time students and a few hundred taking shorter two-week courses, and four new schools are being built elsewhere in the country. If the schools can train two thousand cutters and half as many gemologists in the next five years, he believes, the island could start to attract foreign jewellers placing large orders. "We are isolated and a long way from anyone," I heard him tell a room full of Malagasy dealers one day, as they prepared for their first gem show in Bangkok. "We are many decades behind. *But we have the product!* That is our advantage. We are the belle of the ball. Everyone wants to dance with us."

One afternoon a few days after we arrived in Ilakaka, Cushman drove into town to meet Alberto Philippe, a slick young Malagasy dealer with a rakish mustache who'd been dogging his footsteps all week. Philippe had said to meet him at the Hotely Vatosoa, one of the dingy little restaurants on the main drag. He claimed to have fabulous sapphires for sale, as well as rare alexandrites that looked like emeralds in sunlight and like rubies under lamplight, but Cushman wasn't optimistic. The city had grown safer since the early days, he said, but its swindlers were also more sophisticated. When they tried to sell fakes to a dealer, they now used synthetic and treated stones that were nearly as cheap as glass and much harder to spot. "They're pretty much convinced that you can slaughter 'em only once but you can shear 'em all day long," he said.

The change in tactics had forced Cushman to become savvier as well. Since his first trip to the island with Michael Couch, he had schooled himself in what he called the fifth "C": not color, cut, clarity, or carat weight but chemistry. Most gems owe their colors to chemical impurities. Rubies and sapphires, for instance, are essentially the same stone: corundum, a form of aluminum oxide, colored by different trace elements. Rubies contain chromium; blue sapphires have titanium and iron; purple sapphires may have all three (any colored corundum that isn't red is called a sapphire). Because these impurities break down at different temperatures, some gems change color when they're heated. Others have all the makings of a beautiful hue suspended within a dull crystal. They aren't so much cloudy as undercooked.

Heat treatment is the alchemy of the gem world, and cookers, as those who do the work are called, are the most secretive of its sects. The best cookers in the world are said to be in Chanthaburi, Thailand. "They're freaky guys," Gavin Linsell, of GemsTV, a gem dealership and processor in Chanthaburi, told me. "I don't talk to them. I don't even talk to their bosses." (He later said that they're becoming more open about their methods.) Until the nineteen-sixties, heat treatment was a low-tech affair that hadn't changed much since Pliny the Elder referred to it in his "History of the World." In Sri Lanka, for instance, cookers would pack stones in balls of lime and clay, drop them into an open fire, and blast the flames with blowpipes. At around eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit, aquamarine would turn from blue-green to blue; between nine hundred and eleven hundred degrees, purple amethyst turned to orange citrine. If you could stoke the fire to twenty-two hundred degrees, you could even turn a purple sapphire into a red ruby. What you couldn't do was make a cloudy stone clear.

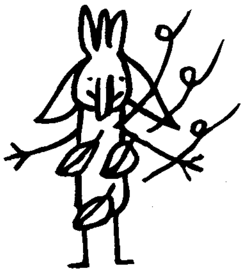
Then, a little more than thirty years ago, the cookers of Chanthaburi quietly began to buy large shipments of a low-grade sapphire known as geuda. This was a stone so unattractive that the Sri Lankans had tossed mountains of it aside over the years. They called it "fish-tank material." Like gem-quality sapphire, geuda was corundum, but it contained needles of titanium dioxide that gave it a grayish color, as if smoke had been blown into it. Titanium dioxide dissolves into corundum somewhere between twenty-five hundred and three thousand degrees Fahrenheit. By lining a fifty-five-gallon drum with furnace bricks and attaching it to a diesel burner and an oxygen pump, the Thais had managed to generate temperatures within that range.

"It was basically a flamethrower," Linsell said. "A flamethrower wrapped in an oil drum with an Aqua-Lung attached. It was bloody dangerous." But when you threw geuda inside something magical happened. As the titanium dioxide dissolved, it reacted with iron atoms in the crystal, turning the corundum blue. "It's like there was a little spot at the center of this milky white, and it just exploded out," Linsell said. What went into the oven as a piece of gravel came out a brilliant sapphire.

It took the gem industry nearly a decade to react to what the Thais were doing, and by then their vaults were filled with geuda. "That is what built downtown Bangkok," one expert on heat treatment told me. Eighty per cent of all rubies and sapphires now pass through Thailand at some point, but gem dealers everywhere have grown more sophisticated. They take pieces of clear topaz and bombard them with nuclear radiation, turning them electric blue. They fill fractured rubies with molten glass or fuse their cracks with fluxes. They make salmon-colored padparadschahs—once among the rarest sapphires in the world—by diffusing yellow beryllium through pink corundum. "I have never seen a piece that competes with those," Linsell said of the treated padparadschahs.

In most jewelry stores today, ninety-nine per cent of the stones have been treated in some way. If they haven't, the price may be two to four times as high: a fine, four-carat natural sapphire might cost twenty thousand dollars; an equally fine treated stone might cost five to ten thousand. Remarkably, though, even treated stones have managed to maintain their value. When the Thais first started cooking geuda, large retail chains rushed in to buy the surplus. Sapphires had always been one of the world's most popular gems—"They hold up the roof," Cushman said—and demand simply multiplied to meet the supply. Thirty years later, the stockpiles in Sri Lanka are gone and even good geuda is hard to find.

For a dealer like Cushman, in other words, heat treatment is both a risk and an opportunity. When he looks at cut stones, he has to be able to tell if they've been treated, so that he can adjust his prices accordingly. When he looks at rough, he can't reject the cloudiest stones out of hand, because they're often the ones with the most potential. Heat treatment can turn a worthless gray rock into a thousand-dollar sapphire. The problem is that it can also destroy it or have no effect at all. "It's like throwing a forward pass in football," Cushman told me. "Three things can happen, two of them bad."



When we stepped inside the Hotely Vatosoa that afternoon, the lights were dim and the air smelled faintly of spoiled chicken. Alberto Philippe was sitting at a table off to the side, next to three heavyset men with a sullen look of kept secrets on their faces. They were from Guinea, Philippe told us. They'd been in Ilakaka for nine months and also traded in diamonds from Sierra Leone and blue sapphires from Nigeria. This was promising: a major part of the local gem trade was controlled by men like these. If the Thais claimed the high-end market and the Sri Lankans the middle, the West Africans bought everything else.

"*Messieurs*," Cushman said, spreading his hands wide in front of him. "I am always happy to see beautiful stones." There was a brief silence, then one of the Africans—the stockiest of the three, who had mottled birthmarks on his lower lip and his right eyebrow—shook his head. "They don't want to show us the stones here," Philippe said. "We must go to la Rue Africaine."

Cushman knew the place. It was a stretch of road near the center of town that was home to families from Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Gambia. It was also the site of one of his greatest blunders. Four years earlier, a Tanzanian dealer there had sold him two magnificent pieces of sapphire rough, one of fifteen carats and the other of twenty-five. They were scraggy and malformed, with a "great, alluvial-looking" surface, and might have been worth twelve thousand dollars once cut, except for one problem: they were both synthetic. The dealer had taken a lab-grown crystal, cracked it along its main axis so that its best color wasn't all in one piece, then thrown it into a rock tumbler. "I'm never going to forget what I paid for them: three thousand seven hundred and eighty dollars," Cushman said. "I keep those stones around just to remind me to be extra careful."

The three men from Guinea lived near the end of the African road, in a pair of huts surrounded by a wooden palisade. There was a covered courtyard inside, and a long table where the deals were made. While the others went to get the stones, Cushman pulled out a narrow-beam flashlight of the kind that doctors use to probe a patient's ear. He put on a visor with what looked like sunglasses attached—they were low-magnification lenses, he said—and sat down to wait. After a while, one of the Africans appeared with a bag covered in brown packing tape. He laid a large white board on the table and poured the bag's contents onto it: a pound and a half of sapphire rough, most of it twice the size of anything we'd seen at the mines.

For the next ten minutes, Cushman worked his way through the pile, picking out stones and holding them up to his lenses and flashlight. To skilled gemologists, the cheaper synthetics were easy to spot: their crystals were often accreted in tall cones, like stalagmites, or pulled like taffy from a molten pool of corundum, so that they tended to have air bubbles or curved growth rings. The better synthetics, though, were crystallized almost like natural gemstones, from supersaturated solutions. They formed flat-sided, angular crystals, and generally had no inclusions aside from bits of leftover flux visible only through a microscope. If anything, they were too beautiful.

These sapphires didn't have that problem. In fact, the more closely Cushman examined them the more frustrated he became. Each stone seemed to have a different problem. This one had a spot of opacity; that one had a dark inclusion of some kind; another had so many cracks that it glimmered like a snow globe when he shined his beam into it. Most of them weren't even cloudy enough to make good fodder for the kiln. He went through the pile one more time, hoping to find one or two that might be salvaged. Then he lifted the lenses from his visor and rubbed his eyes. "This is O.K., but it's just O.K.," he said. "Where's the stone with no problems? Where's the really good stuff?"

The Africans glanced at one another. They waited for him to make an offer, as if all this talk were just a bargaining ploy. Then they realized that he wasn't bluffing. "No," the one with the birthmarks said, finally, lighting a cigarette. "This is all I have."

By the time we left, the sun was setting and miners were streaming in from the countryside, stirring up a haze of dust. In the little booths along the main road, prostitutes leaned out on plump forearms, surveying the crowd, while scruffy young men gathered at makeshift casinos next door, shooting craps or spinning roulette wheels made of old bicycle tires. You could feel the atmosphere amping up along with the city's electrical generators. Soon, the lights would flicker on and the real wagering would begin.

"A booby-trapped package is what it was," Cushman said, as we climbed back into the van. The Guineans had put together all the flawed but impressive-looking stones they could find, hoping to unload them on some unsuspecting buyer. By any normal standard, the sapphires we'd seen were extraordinarily select. They'd been sifted by the forces of geology and history, by miners, panners, collectors, and dealers, each with higher standards than the last. They represented an infinitesimal percentage of the earth's crust—the one-in-a-trillion chance that a rock might be beautiful—yet they still weren't good enough. "I would have paid a hundred and fifty dollars a gram for clean stuff," Cushman said. "They'll probably get thirty."

It was a strange, contradictory sort of perfectionism, I thought. The gem industry wanted natural stones that looked nearly synthetic, without any cracks or inclusions that would truly reveal nature at work. Yet even the most beautiful synthetics were worth only twenty-five dollars a carat. For a dealer like Cushman, Colored Stones 101 was becoming a kind of calculus—an ever more sophisticated science for making ever less meaningful distinctions among stones.

One day soon, pricing a gem might be largely a philosophical exercise: if a synthetic stone is identical to a natural one in every way—if even the most powerful microscope can't show that it's a fake—how valuable is it?

The Malagasy, for their part, were mystified by the whole business. A matchbox full of sapphires could send a hundred thousand of them charging across the desert, but only because foreigners would pay a fortune for the stones. Two thousand years after landing on this gem-encrusted island, they still preferred gold. "It took them a long time to believe we were really buying the stones for decorations," Cushman said. "They thought it was for bombs or electronics—some secret white man's thing." In 2004, Cushman had joined a delegation of Malagasy officials on a trip to Chanthaburi, to see what might lie in Madagascar's future. When the visitors stepped into one of the city's vast gem-processing factories, where sapphires are cut and set by the tens of thousands, one of them turned to Cushman and muttered, "So they really do just use them for jewels!"

On our last day in the southern plains, we stopped at a roadside restaurant two hours west of Ilakaka, in a small sapphire town called Sakaraha. Like most things on the island, the food had been a mixture of the crude, the exquisite, and the deeply weird. Sometimes we'd had native fare—"rice and bone, rice and meat, rice and gristle, rice and fat," as Cushman put it—sometimes French classics like coq au vin; and sometimes peculiar combinations of the two. At various points, I'd eaten crocodile pâté, deep-fried frog, boiled zebu tongue, and stewed fruit bat with its wings still on. Apparently, though, I'd been spared the real rigors of the local cuisine. "If you ask around this room, the Malagasy men will all tell you they were circumcised between the ages of two and five and their father ate the foreskin with banana," a gem dealer told me one night.

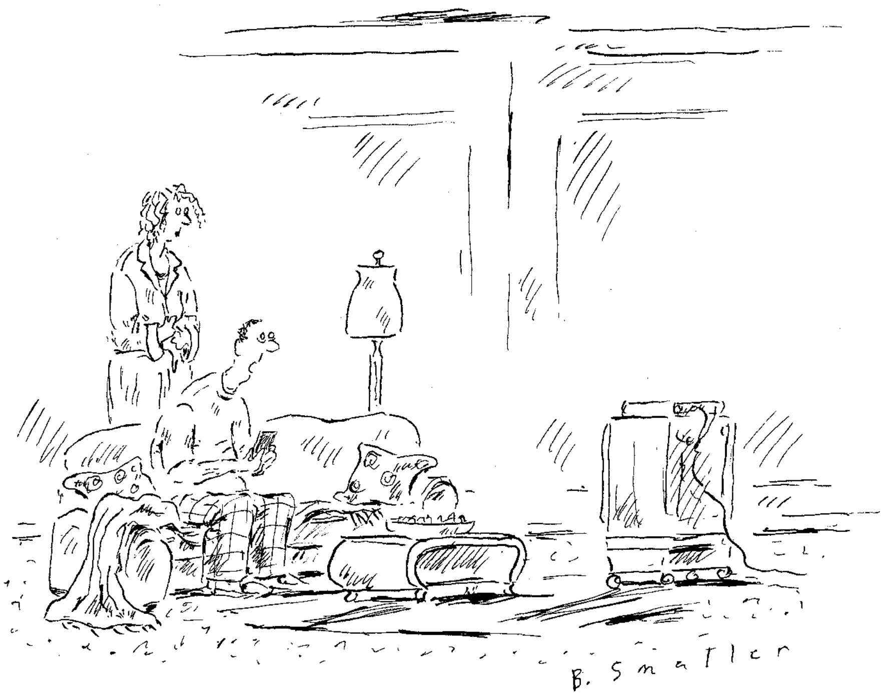
Cushman stared at the menu without enthusiasm. It had been a singularly unsuccessful trip. Despite the five thousand dollars' worth of Malagasy ariary in his backpack, he hadn't bought a single gem. Ilakaka still had plenty of sapphires left to discover, and the island was producing more gems every year. In the rain forests to the north, for instance, rich ruby deposits had been found in 2000. But Cushman was rarely in the field now, and the miners saved their best stones for others. "They don't know who the fuck I am," he said.

He was about to order when the door of the restaurant banged open and his driver, Fidy, charged into the room. "*La Bombe, il est là!*" he said.

We'd been hearing rumors of La Bombe's movements for days, as if he were some rogue lion out prowling the savanna. Now here he was, standing by one of his black S.U.V.s, patiently waiting his turn at a gas station. He was dressed in a white jogging suit, with bright-pink flip-flops, and looked a bit like Little Richard gone to seed: substantial gut, thin mustache, tall pile of curly black hair. "Got any business?" he said, when he saw Cushman standing by the restaurant. "What can we do together?" Cushman shook his head. He was working at the school now, he said. "If you can bring me stones, I can buy them," La Bombe told him. Cushman shook his head again, with what seemed like real regret. And for a moment they looked oddly alike: two gem dealers in a dry season.

La Bombe had blown one or two fortunes since arriving in Ilakaka, I'd heard, and Cushman had been talking about retirement lately. He loved his work at the gemology school, he said. But the more he concentrated on educating the locals rather than on outfoxing them, the more of an outsider he seemed to become. He used to live in hotel rooms and apartments, and spend his days on the street bouncing from miner to cutter to dealer to exporter. "I wasn't just a pretty face," he said. "I was part of the economy." Now he taught classes in a jacket and tie, and rented a house in Antananarivo with a high fence and a twenty-four-hour guard. He was becoming, little by little, the kind of Western do-gooder that he once scorned. "It's like my father used to tell me," he said. "You can have anything you want. You just can't have everything."

He and La Bombe stood quietly in the street for a few minutes, then Cushman turned to go. "Listen," La Bombe said, calling him back. "Can you buy me a tank of gas?" Cushman stared at him. "You are a billionaire!" he said, laughing. "If I had your money, I'd burn all of mine!" La Bombe shot him an anxious look—was this foreigner really talking about burning money?—then chuckled sheepishly. "Yes," he said. "But billionaires still need gas for their cars." ♦

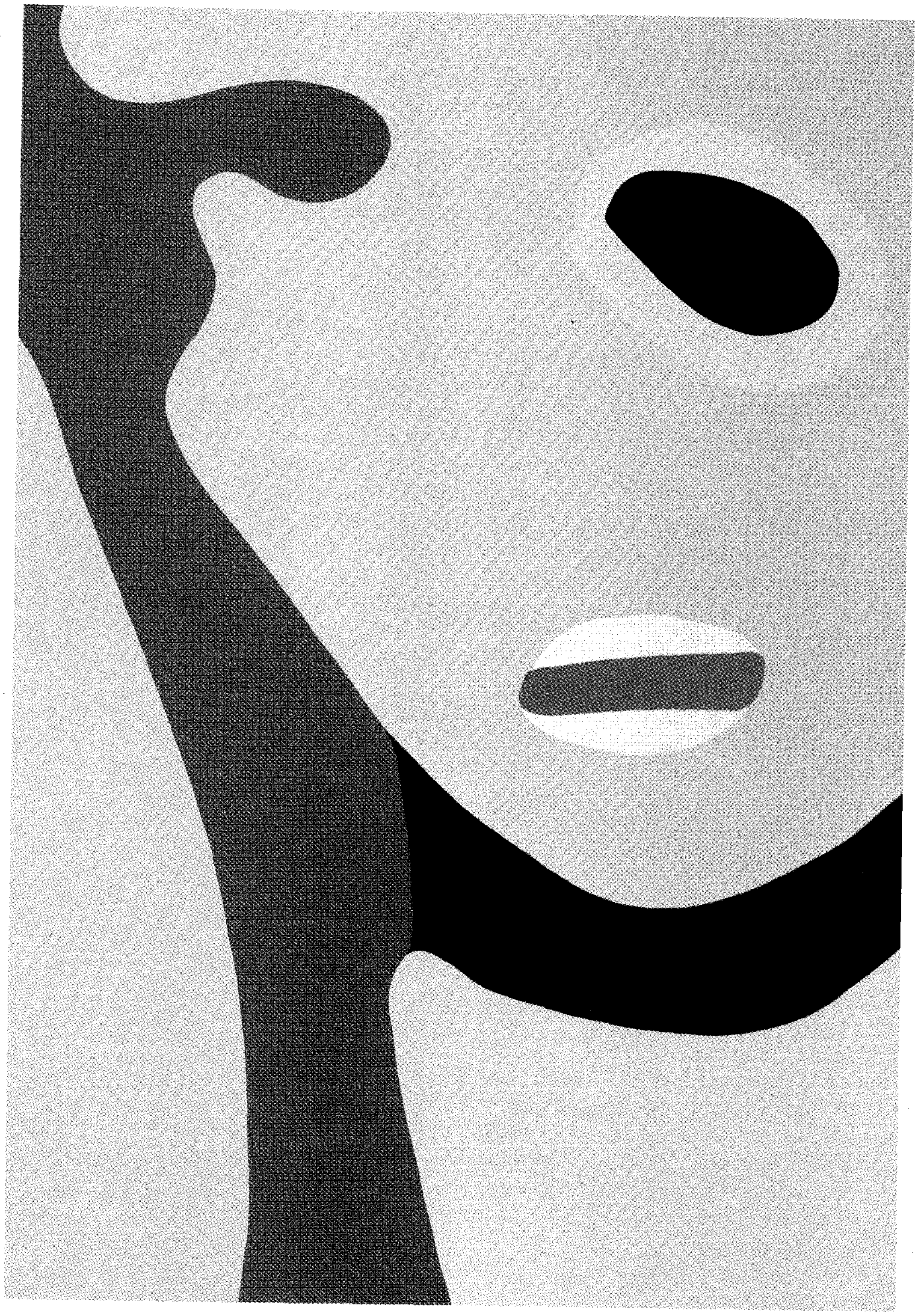


"It's only insomnia if there's nothing good on."

FICTION

OTHER PEOPLE'S DEATHS

BY LORE SEGAL



EVERYBODY LEAVING

The coroner's men put James in the back of the truck and drove away, and the Bernstines, once again, urged Ilka to come home with them, at least for the night, or to let them take the baby. Again, Ilka was earnest in begging to be left right here, wanted the baby to stay here with her. No thank you, really, she did not need—did not want—anybody sleeping over.

The friends and colleagues trooped down the path: Leslie Shakespeare, the director, and Joe Bernstine, the co-founder of the Concordance Institute—genus think tank, of which Ilka was, and poor Jimmy had been, junior members—and their colleagues the Ayes, the Zees, the Cohns, and the Stones. Outside the gate they stopped, they looked back, but Ilka had taken the baby inside and closed the door. They stood for a moment, they talked, not accounting to themselves for the intense charm of the summer hill rising behind Ilka's house, of standing, of breathing—of the glamour of being alive. Leslie asked everyone to come over for a drink.

The report of the accident had come at the very moment the committee was about to vote on Jimmy's retention.

Jimmy had told Ilka not to worry when he accepted the job as the institute's director of projects: what he didn't know about the *Who's Who* of scholarship he would pick up as he went along. Ilka had worried. She watched him not writing the book stipulated in his contract. She watched him worry when he screwed up the institute's directories on the new computer. Called on the carpet most recently for failing to file a duplicate of his letter to one conference participant, Jimmy had failed to confess that he couldn't find the fellow's address. Leslie Shakespeare had sent Jimmy out of town on institute business while his retention was under discussion.

GARY HUME, "THE CLERIC" (2000) / MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

The friends and colleagues began to move along the sidewalk in groups and pairs. Alfred Stone walked with his wife, Alpha. Alfred was a doctor, the only one of the group unconnected with the work of the institute. It was he who had attended at the scene of the accident. As he walked, he was arranging the sentence he ought to have spoken to the widow when he arrived at her house or at some moment in the hours since.

Everybody stopped at the corner. Ilka's door had opened and the two policemen came out. They had spent the day in the hallway trying to look inconspicuous. Now that the dead man, brought so inexplicably home from the scene of the accident, had been removed, they could finally leave. The small Puerto Rican policeman walked out the gate, but the big young policeman turned to wave. Ilka must be standing back in the darkness. The two policemen got into their car and drove away.

Inside her foyer Ilka closed the door and leaned her head against it, devastated at everybody's leaving.

WORDS TO SPEAK TO THE WIDOW

At the Shakespeares' there was the business of walking into the sitting room, of sitting down, of the drinks. "A lot of ice, Leslie. Thanks." "Martini, please, and hold the vegetables."

Little, agile Joe Bernstine smiled sadly. "I wonder if we retained Jimmy."

Leslie Shakespeare said, "Alpha will schedule us a new search committee."

Nobody said, We could hardly do worse than poor Jimmy.

Jenny Bernstine said, "Ilka is being very gallant and terrific."

Nobody said, She didn't cry.

Alicia Aye said, "Ilka isn't one to throw her hands up."

"Or the towel in, *or* the sponge," said Eliza Shakespeare. "Joke. Sorry!"

Alicia said, "Ilka is not one to drown in her sorrows."

"Well, I'm going to drown mine," Eliza said, holding her glass out to Leslie, who refilled it.

Alicia said, "We live on borrowed time."

Alpha asked her husband, "The policeman said there was fire?" and the friends' and colleagues' imaginations went into action to dim or scramble or in some way unthink the flames in which Jimmy—this person they knew—was burning. They wished to avoid an image of which they would never entirely be able to rid themselves.

Dr. Stone replied that Jimmy's body had been thrown clear of the burning car. The fall had broken his neck.

The flames went out. The friends envisaged an unnaturally angled head with Jimmy's face.

Dr. Alfred Stone took his drink and sat down. He was a very large man, with a large head that, Ilka had once told the Shakespeares, she thought would look good on Mt. Rushmore. Eliza said that jaw, that forelock were from the Sunday funnies—the muscle-bound superhero with the heart of tin. "Aw!" Ilka had said. "Poor Alfred! I like Alfred." Dr. Stone looked around the room and located his wife, Alpha, sitting beside Eliza Shakespeare. Were they talking about the death? Alfred had, earlier in the day, looked across another room and seen Alpha talking with Ilka. He had wondered what words Alpha might be saying to the widow: To refer to the death would be putting a finger in the wound, but how *not* to mention it? And wasn't it gross to be talking of anything else? Alfred mistakenly believed himself to be singularly lacking in what normal people—the people in this room—were born knowing. He thought that other people knew how to feel and what to say. He watched them walk out and return with drinks. They stood together, they talked. Dr. Stone remained sitting.

At eleven o'clock that first night a brutal loneliness knocked the wind out of Ilka. Then her phone rang. "We thought we'd see how you were doing," Leslie said. "Did the baby get to sleep?"

"The baby is O.K. I'm O.K. Is it O.K. to be O.K.? I could do with some retroactive lead time. I need to practice taking my stockings off with Jimmy dead. Relearn how to clean my teeth."

Leslie said, "Wait." Ilka heard him pass on to Eliza, who must be in the room, who might be lying in the bed beside him, that Ilka was O.K. but needed to relearn how to clean her teeth with Jimmy dead. His voice returned full strength.

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Cash only. No more than four tickets can be sold per person. The film is rated PG-13.

THREE NAPS ON *SWAN'S* ISLAND

I slept, when I woke
I had built this cabin
with its shade garden,
flagstones, and screened porch
overlooking Burnt Coat Harbor.

I dozed, when I came to myself
we were married, our child
called from an inner room—
you stirred and tiptoed out,
agile as the breeze.

I drowsed, and at twilight
I remained in the dream,
in the cursive slope of the letters
that would contain it, caught
in the maze of reflected masts,

so I bit back panic and listened
for the bell from the ocean.

—*D. Nurkse*

"Eliza says we're coming over in the morning to bring you breakfast."

SITTING SHIVAH

"I don't know how," said Ilka. Joe Bernstine remembered that when his father died his mother had turned the faces of the mirrors to the wall. Ilka was struck by the gesture but embarrassed by its drama. "I know I'm supposed to sit on a low stool, but I can't get any lower," she said. She was sitting on the floor tickling Maggie, the fat, solemn, comfortable baby. Baby Maggie's eyes were so large that they seemed to round the corner of the little face, with its hanging cheeks.

"A baroque baby," Eliza said.

"She's fun to hold because she collapses her weight in your arms." Ilka jumped Maggie up and down. "She must have heard me scream when the policemen told me."

Eliza unpacked the tiny tomatoes from her garden. She had baked two long loaves of white bread. Jenny was arranging the cold cuts that she had brought onto the platters she had brought. At some point in the morning Joe and Leslie rose to go to the institute. They would be back in an hour. Leslie bent his fine head over Ilka's hand and brought it to his lips.

Ilka said, "I called my mother and she's coming tomorrow."

IN THE INSTITUTE

Celie, the receptionist, sat at her desk across from the front entrance and fanned herself with an envelope, like someone trying to avoid fainting. She told Betty, one of the assistants, "I talked with him that actual morning! He comes running in, punches the elevator button, doesn't wait and runs right up those stairs, comes right down. He's stuffing papers in his briefcase. I told him, 'You have a good trip now,' and he says, 'Oh shit!' and he's going to run back up except the elevator door opens, and he gets in."

Betty was able to one-up Celie with her spatial proximity to the dead man, though at a greater temporal remove. The day *before* James drove to Washington he had tried to open the door into the conference room with papers under his arm, carrying a cup of coffee, saying, "Anybody got a spare hand?" Betty had held the door for him. He had said, "Oh! Thanks!"

Could a person for whom one held a door, who said, "Oh shit!" and "Oh! Thanks!" be dead?

WORDS TO WRITE TO THE WIDOW

Nancy Cohn and Maria Zee talked on the telephone and one-upped each other in respect to who was the more upset. "I got to my office," said Maria, "and just sat."

"I," Nancy said, "never made it to the office, because I kept waking up every hour *on* the hour."

"I never got to sleep! I kept waking poor Zack to check if he was alive. He was fit to be tied."

"Have you called her?"

"I thought I would write."

"That's what I will do. I'll write her," said Nancy.

SITTING SHIVAH, DAY TWO

"It's good of you to come," Ilka said to the visitors. The institute staff dropped over together, after office hours. Celie, Betty, Wendy, and Barbara sat around the table in Ilka's kitchen. The fellows sat in the living room. Ilka's mother held the baby on her lap. Ilka let out a sudden laugh, and said, "What'll I do when the party is over!" She rose, picked up little Maggie, and carried her out of the room, up the stairs, past Dr. Stone hiding in the foyer.

Dr. Stone believed that by the time Ilka returned he would be ready with a sentence to say to her, but he was relieved, when she came down, that the baby's head intervened between his face and Ilka's face, and the front doorbell was ringing again. Martin Moses, a junior member, walked in, took Ilka and her baby into a big hug, and said, "Christ, Ilka!" Ilka said, "Don't I know it."

"Give her to me," Ilka's mother said and took the child out of Ilka's arms.

Alpha came out of the living room, saying, "Hello, Martin. Ilka, listen, take it easy. You take a couple of days—as long as you like, you know that! Alfred, we have to go." And the Ayes and the Zees had to go home. Celie and the rest left. Martin left. The Shakespeares said they would be back. Ilka thought that everyone had gone when she heard a gentle clatter in the kitchen. Jenny Bernstine was washing dishes.

People trickled over in the evening—a smaller crowd, which left sooner. Jenny washed more dishes. When Joe came to pick her up, she looked anxiously at Ilka, who said, "I'm O.K."

WRITING TO THE WIDOW

Nancy Cohn went to look for Nat. He was on the living-room couch, watching TV.

Nancy said, "I'm embarrassed not to know what to write to Ilka. It's embarrassing worrying about being embarrassed, for Chrissake!"

"Calamity is a foreign country. We don't know how to talk to the natives."

Nancy said, "*You* write her. You're the writer in the family."

"I'm not feeling well," said Nat.

"She's *your* colleague!" said Nancy.

And so neither of them wrote to Ilka.

* * *

Maria Zee called Alicia Aye and asked her, "I mean, we went *over* there. Do we still have to write?"

Alicia said, "Alvin says we'll have her over next time we have people in."

A CASSEROLE

Celie cooked a casserole and told Art, her thirteen-year-old, to take it over to Mrs. Carl's house.

"The woman that her husband burned up in his car? No way!"

Linda, who was fifteen, said, "For your information, he did *not* even burn up. He broke his neck." She advised her brother to check his facts.

Art said, "Linda will go and take it over to her."

Well, Linda wasn't going over there, not by herself, so Celie made them both go.

Nobody answered the front bell.

Art said, "I never knew a dead person before."

Linda said, "You mean you never knew a person and afterward they died, and you didn't as a *fact* even know this person at all."

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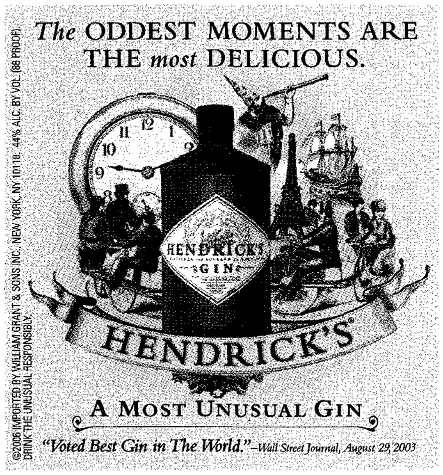
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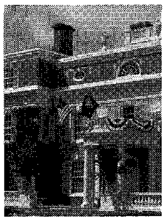
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Art said, "But I know Mom, and Mom knew him. Ring it again."

They found a couple of bricks, piled one on top of the other, and took turns standing on them to look in the window. Those were the stairs the dead man must have walked up and down on. There was a little table with a telephone on it, and a chair. Had the dead man sat on that exact chair and lifted that phone to his ear?

RUNNING AWAY

Yvette Gordot, the institute's economist, who had not called on Ilka, drove over, rang the bell, saw the casserole by the front door, thought, She's out, skipped down the steps, got in her car, and drove away.

"She was out," Dr. Stone reported to his wife.

"Who was?"

"Ilka was out, with the baby. I practically fell over the stroller, corner of Euclid."

"What did you say to her?" Alpha asked him

"Say?" said Alfred. "Nothing. She was across the street on the other sidewalk."

Trying to imagine an impossibility hurts the head. Having failed to envisage Alfred falling over a stroller that was on the other sidewalk, Alpha chose to assume that she had missed or misunderstood some part of what he had told her.

Alfred came to remember not what had happened but what he said had happened. The unspoken words he owed the widow displaced themselves into his chest and gave him heartburn.

NIGHT CONVERSATION

"Celie left a casserole. Alfred fell into Maggie's stroller," Ilka reported to the Shakespeares when they phoned at eleven that night.

Leslie said, "Eliza says, 'What did Alfred say to you?' "

"He slapped his forehead the way you're supposed to slap your forehead when you remember something you've forgotten—and ran across the street to the other sidewalk. Poor Alfred! He's so beautiful."

Eliza took the phone from Leslie. "Why 'poor Alfred' when he's behaving like a heel?" she asked Ilka.

Ilka said, "Because Jimmy's death is making him shy of me. He thinks it's impolite of him to be standing upright."

Eliza said, "The good Lord intended Alfred to be your basic shit, and Alfred went into medicine in the hope of turning into a human being."

"Doesn't he get points for hoping?"

"Why can't you just be offended?"

"Don't know," said Ilka. "I mean, people can't help being heels and shits."

"You sound like Jimmy," said Eliza, and Ilka listened and heard the sound, over the telephone, of Eliza weeping for Ilka's husband.

INVITING THE WIDOW

Nancy said, "We'll have her in when we have people over. The Stones are coming Sunday. Only, you think she wants to be around people?"

"Call her and ask her?" said Nat.

"You call her and ask her."

"*I'm* not going to call her. You call her."

"She's *your* colleague, *you* call her."

"I'm not well."

"I don't think she wants to be around people," Nancy said. "And her mother is staying with her."

DR. ALFRED STONE

Dr. Alfred Stone continued to mean to say to the widow what, as a doctor—as the doctor who had been on the scene of the accident—he ought and must surely be going to say to her. He always thought that by the next time he was face to face with her he would have found the appropriate words, and blushed crimson when he walked into the Shakespeares' kitchen and saw little Maggie sitting in a high chair and Ilka crawling underneath the table. She said, "Hi, Alfred. Look what Maggie did to poor Eliza's floor! And now Bethy is going to take Maggie to play in the yard so the grownups can sit down in peace and quiet. O.K., Bethy. She's all yours!"

Bethy Bernstine had grown bigger and bulkier. The bend of Bethy's waist, as she buttoned the baby into her sweater, cried out to her parents, to her parents' friends, Watch me buttoning the baby's sweater! Bethy's foot on the back stair into the yard pleaded, This is me taking the baby into the yard. Notice me!

Murphy's Law seated Dr. Alfred Stone

next to the widow. While the conversation was general, he tried for a sideways view of her face, which was turned to Eliza on her other side. Alfred was looking for the mark on Ilka, the sign that her husband had been thrown from a burning car and had broken his neck. Alfred studied his wife across the table. Would Alpha, if he, Alfred, broke *his* neck, look so regular and ordinary? Would she laugh at something Eliza said?

As they were leaving, Alpha asked Ilka to dinner and Ilka said, "If I can get a sitter. My mother has gone back to New York." Jenny Bernstine offered Bethy.

After that, and for the next few weeks, the friends and colleagues invited Ilka to their dinners. She always said yes. "I'm afraid," she told the Shakespeares, "that my first 'No, thank you' will facilitate the next no and start a future of noes." Then, one day, as she was driving herself to the Zees', Ilka drove past their house, made a U-turn, and drove home. She insisted on paying Bethy for the full evening.

"We missed you," Leslie said on the telephone.

"How come it gets harder instead of easier? You put on your right stocking and there's the left stocking to still be put on, and the right and the left shoe..." Ilka heard Leslie tell Eliza what Ilka said.

In the morning, Ilka called Maria Zee to apologize, and Maria said, "Don't be silly!"

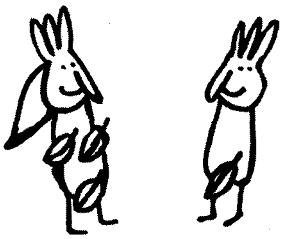
"A rain check?"

"Absolutely," said Maria. "Or you call me!"

"Absolutely," said Ilka. But Ilka did not call her, and Maria did not call Ilka. One's house seemed more comfortable without Ilka from Calamity.

BETHY BERNSTINE

The Bernstines and the Shakespeares were the true friends. Ilka loved them and missed Jimmy because he was missing the pleasure of Eliza's risotto and of Leslie's wine that yielded taste upon taste on the tongue. Ilka held out her glass, watched Joe's hand tip the bottle, and thought, Joe will die, not now, not soon, maybe, but he will die. Ilka saw Jenny looking at her with her soft, anxious affection and thought, Jenny will die. "Will you forgive me," Ilka said to them, "if I take myself home?" Of course, of course! Leslie must drive Ilka. "Absolutely not! Honestly! You would do me the greatest possible favor if you would let me go by myself." "Joe will drive Ilka." "Let me drive you!" said Joe. "No, no, no!" cried Ilka. They could see that she was distraught. "Let Ilka alone," said Leslie. "Ilka will drive herself. Ilka will be fine."



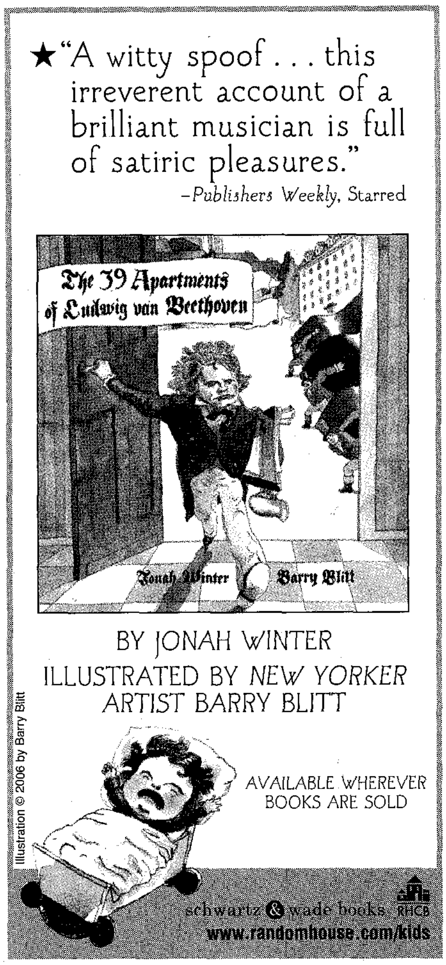
Leslie and Joe came out to put Ilka into her car. She saw them, in the rearview mirror, as she drove away, two old friends standing together, talking on the sidewalk. There would be a time when both of them would have been dead for years.

Bethy was curled on the couch, warm and smelling of sleep, her skin sweet and dewy. Cruel for a sixteen-year-old to be plain—too much chin and jowl, the little, pursed, unhappy mouth. Ilka woke Bethy with a hand on her shoulder. She helped the girl collect herself, straighten her bones, pick her books off the floor. Ilka walked her out and stood on the sidewalk.

Maggie was sleeping on her back, arms above her head, palms curled. In her throat, and behind her eyes, Ilka felt the tears she could not begin to cry and she feared that beast in the jungle which might, someday, stop the tears from stopping.

When Leslie called to make sure she had got home, Ilka said, "I've been doing arithmetic. Subtract the age I am from the age at which I'm likely to die and it seems like a hell of a lot of years."

Though the words Dr. Alfred Stone had failed to say to Ilka had become inappropriate and could never be said, he tended, when they were in the same room, to move along the wall at the furthest remove from where Ilka might be moving or standing or sitting. ♦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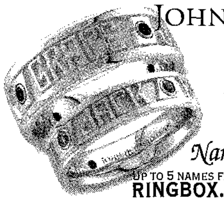
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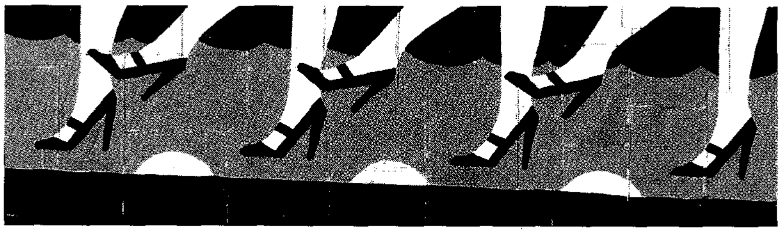
THE CRITICS



JOOST SWARTE

A CRITIC AT LARGE

UNSTRUNG

In string theory, beauty is truth, truth beauty. Is that really all we need to know?

BY JIM HOLT

It is the best of times in physics. Physicists are on the verge of obtaining the long-sought Theory of Everything. In a few elegant equations, perhaps concise enough to be emblazoned on a T-shirt, this theory will reveal how the universe began and how it will end. The key insight is that the smallest constituents of the world are not particles, as had been supposed since ancient times, but “strings”—tiny strands of energy. By vibrating in different ways, these strings produce the essential phenomena of nature, the way violin strings produce musical notes. String theory isn’t just powerful; it’s also mathematically beautiful. All that remains to be done is to write down the actual equations. This is taking a little longer than expected. But, with almost the entire theoretical-physics community working on the problem—presided over by a sage in Princeton, New Jersey—the millennia-old dream of a final theory is sure to be realized before long.

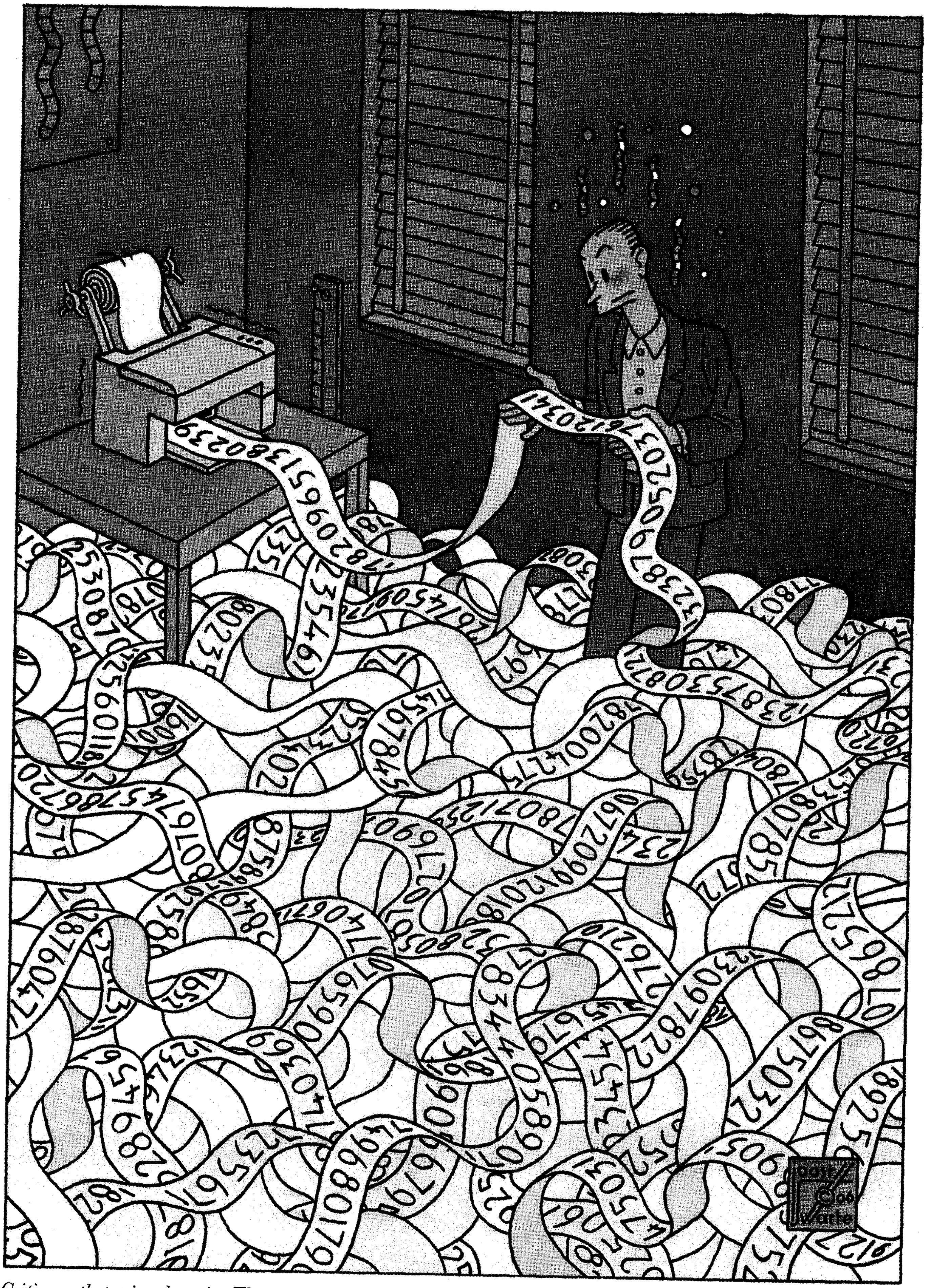
It is the worst of times in physics. For more than a generation, physicists have been chasing a will-o’-the-wisp called string theory. The beginning of this chase marked the end of what had been three-quarters of a century of progress. Dozens of string-theory conferences have been held, hundreds of new Ph.D.s have been minted, and thousands of papers have been written. Yet, for all this activity, not a single new testable prediction has been made, not a single theoretical puzzle has been solved. In fact, there *is* no theory so far—just a set of hunches and calculations suggesting that a theory might exist. And, even if it does, this theory will come in such a bewildering number of versions that it will be of no practical use: a Theory of Nothing. Yet the physics establishment promotes string theory with irrational fervor, ruthlessly weeding dissenting physicists from the profession. Meanwhile, physics is stuck in a paradigm doomed to barrenness.

So which is it: the best of times or the worst of times? This is, after all, theoretical physics, not a Victorian novel. If you are a casual reader of science articles in the newspaper, you are probably more familiar with the optimistic view. But string theory has always had a few vocal skeptics. Almost two decades ago, Richard Feynman dismissed it as “crazy,” “nonsense,” and “the wrong direction” for physics. Sheldon Glashow, who won a Nobel Prize for making one of the last great advances in physics before the beginning of the string-theory era, has likened string theory to a “new version of medieval theology,” and campaigned to keep string theorists out of his own department at Harvard. (He failed.)

Now two members of the string-theory generation have come forward with exposés of what they deem to be the current mess. “The story I will tell could be read by some as a tragedy,” Lee Smolin writes in “The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next” (Houghton Mifflin; $26). Peter Woit, in “Not Even Wrong: The Failure of String Theory and the Search for Unity in Physical Law” (Basic; $26.95), prefers the term “disaster.” Both Smolin and Woit were journeyman physicists when string theory became fashionable, in the early nineteen-eighties. Both are now outsiders: Smolin, a reformed string theorist (he wrote eighteen papers on the subject), has helped found a sort of Menshevik cell of physicists in Canada called the Perimeter Institute; Woit abandoned professional physics for mathematics (he is a lecturer in the mathematics department at Columbia), which gives him a cross-disciplinary perspective. Each author delivers a bill of indictment that is a mixture of science, philosophy, aesthetics, and, surprisingly, sociology. Physics, in their view, has been overtaken by a cutthroat culture that rewards technicians who work on officially sanctioned problems and discourages visionaries in the mold of Albert Einstein. Woit argues that string theory’s lack of rigor has left its practitioners unable to distinguish between a scientific hoax and a genuine contribution. Smolin adds a moral dimension to his plaint, linking string theory to the physics profession’s “blatant prejudice” against women and blacks. Pondering the cult of empty mathematical virtuosity, he asks, “How many leading theoretical physicists were once insecure, small, pimply boys who got their revenge besting the jocks (who got the girls) in the one place they could—math class?”

It is strange to think that such sordid motives might affect something as pure and objective as physics. But these are strange days in the discipline. For the first time in its history, theory has caught up with experiment. In the absence of new data, physicists must steer by something other than hard empirical evidence in their quest for a final theory. And that something they call “beauty.” But in physics, as in the rest of life, beauty can be a slippery thing.

The gold standard for beauty in physics is Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity. What makes it beautiful? First, there is its simplicity. In a single equation, it explains the force of gravity as a curving in the geometry of space-time caused by the presence of mass: mass tells space-time how to curve, space-time tells mass how to move. Then, there is its surprise: who would have imagined that this whole theory would flow from the natural assumption that all frames of ref-



Critics say that string theory is a Theory of Nothing—a vast set of untestable conjectures protected by groupthink and conformity.

erence are equal, that the laws of physics should not change when you hop on a merry-go-round? Finally, there is its aura of inevitability. Nothing about it can be modified without destroying its logical structure. The physicist Steven Weinberg has compared it to Raphael's "Holy Family," in which every figure on the canvas is perfectly placed and there is nothing you would have wanted the artist to do differently.

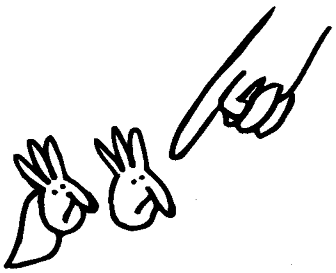
Einstein's general relativity was one of two revolutionary innovations in the early part of the twentieth century which inaugurated the modern era in physics. The other was quantum mechanics. Of the two, quantum mechanics was the more radical departure from the old Newtonian physics. Unlike general relativity, which dealt with well-defined objects existing in a smooth (albeit curved) space-time geometry, quantum mechanics described a random, choppy microworld where change happens in leaps, where particles act like waves (and vice versa), and where uncertainty reigns.

In the decades after this dual revolution, most of the action was on the quantum side. In addition to gravity, there are three basic forces that govern nature: electromagnetism, the "strong" force (which holds the nucleus of an atom together), and the "weak" force (which causes radioactive decay). Eventually, physicists managed to incorporate all three into the framework of quantum mechanics, creating the "standard model" of particle physics. The standard model is something of a stick-and-bubble-gum contraption: it clumsily joins very dissimilar kinds of interactions, and its equations contain about twenty arbitrary-seeming numbers—corresponding to the masses of the various particles, the ratios of the force strengths, and so on—that had to be experimentally measured and put in "by hand." Still, the standard model has proved to be splendidly useful, predicting the result of every subsequent experiment in particle physics with exquisite accuracy, often down to the eleventh decimal place. As Feynman once observed, that's like calculating the distance from Los Angeles to New York to within a hairbreadth.

The standard model was hammered out by the mid-nineteen-seventies, and has not had to be seriously revised since. It tells how nature behaves on the scale of molecules, atoms, electrons, and on down, where the force of gravity is weak enough to be overlooked. General relativity tells how nature behaves on the scale of apples, planets, galaxies, and on up, where quantum uncertainties average out and can be ignored. Between the two theories, all nature seems to be covered. But most physicists aren't happy with this division of labor. Everything in nature, after all, interacts with everything else. Shouldn't there be a single set of rules for describing it, rather than two inconsistent sets? And what happens when the domains of the two theories overlap—that is, when the very massive is also the very small? Just after the big bang, for example, the entire mass of what is now the observable universe was packed into a volume the size of an atom. At that tiny scale, quantum uncertainty causes the smooth geometry of general relativity to break up, and there is no telling how gravity will behave. To understand the birth of the universe, we need a theory that "unifies" general relativity and quantum mechanics. That is the theoretical physicist's dream.

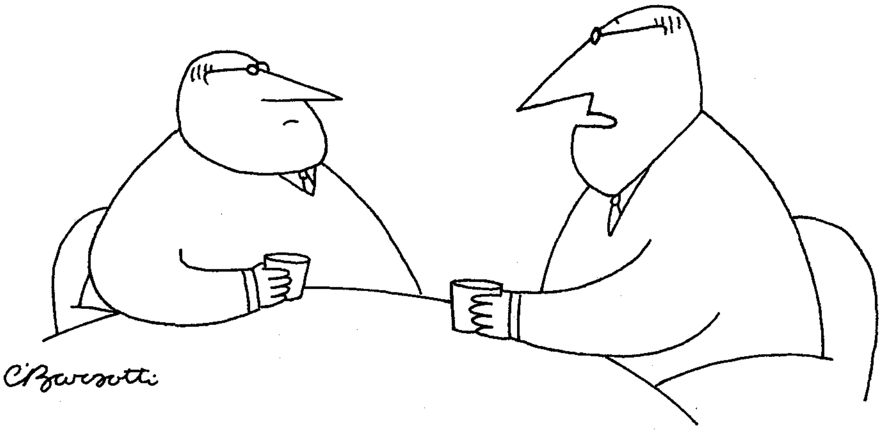
String theory came into existence by accident. In the late nineteen-sixties, a couple of young physicists thumbing through mathematics books came upon a centuries-old formula that, miraculously, seemed to fit the latest experimental data about elementary particles. At first, no one had a clue why this should be. Within a few years, however, the hidden meaning of the formula emerged: if elementary particles were thought of as tiny wriggling strings, it all made sense. What were these strings supposed to be made of? Nothing, really. As one physicist put it, they were to be thought of as "tiny one-dimensional rips in the smooth fabric of space."

This wasn't the only way in which the new theory broke with previous thinking. We seem to live in a world that has three spatial dimensions (along with one time dimension). But for string theory to make mathematical sense the world must have *nine* spatial dimensions. Why don't we notice the six extra dimensions? Because, according to string theory, they are curled up into some microgeometry that makes them invisible. (Think of a garden hose: from a distance it looks one-dimensional, like a line; up close, however, it can be seen to have a second dimension, curled up into a little circle.) The assumption of hidden dimensions struck some physicists as extravagant. To others, though, it seemed a small price to pay. In Smolin's words, "String theory promised what no other theory had before—a quantum theory of gravity that is also a genuine unification of forces and matter."



But when would it make good on that promise? In the decades since its possibilities were first glimpsed, string theory has been through a couple of "revolutions." The first took place in 1984, when some potentially fatal kinks in the theory were worked out. On the heels of this achievement, four physicists at Princeton, dubbed the Princeton String Quartet, showed that string theory could indeed encompass all the forces of nature. Within a few years, physicists around the world had written more than a thousand papers on string theory. The theory also attracted the interest of the leading figure in the world of theoretical physics, Edward Witten.

Witten, now at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, is held in awe by his fellow-physicists, who have been known to compare him to Einstein. As a teen-ager, he was more interested in politics than in physics. In 1968, at the age of seventeen, he published an article in *The Nation* arguing that the New Left had no political strategy. He majored in history at Brandeis, and worked on George McGovern's 1972 Presidential campaign. (McGovern wrote him a letter of recommendation for graduate school.) When he decided to pursue a career in physics, he proved to be a quick study: Princeton Ph.D., Harvard postdoc, full professorship at Princeton at the age of twenty-nine, MacArthur "genius grant" two years later. Witten's papers are models of depth and clarity. Other physicists attack problems by doing complicated calculations; he solves them by reasoning from first principles. Witten once said that "the greatest intellectual thrill of my life" was learning that string theory could encompass both gravity and quantum mechanics. His string-theoretic investigations



"Of course we're gated, but are we gated enough?"

have led to stunning advances in pure mathematics, especially in the abstract study of knots. In 1990, he became the first physicist to be awarded the Fields Medal, considered the Nobel Prize of mathematics.

It was Witten who ushered in the second string-theory revolution, which addressed a conundrum that had arisen, in part, from all those extra dimensions. They had to be curled up so that they were invisibly small, but it turned out that there were various ways of doing this, and physicists were continually finding new ones. If there was more than one version of string theory, how could we decide which version was correct? No experiment could resolve the matter, since string theory concerns energies far beyond those which can be attained by particle accelerators. By the early nineteen-nineties, no fewer than five versions of string theory had been devised. Discouragement was in the air. But the mood improved markedly when, in 1995, Witten announced to an audience of string theorists at a conference in Los Angeles that these five seemingly distinct theories were mere facets of something deeper, which he called "M-theory." In addition to vibrating strings, M-theory allowed for vibrating membranes and blobs. As for the name of the new theory, Witten was noncommittal; he said that "M stands for magic, mystery, or membrane, according to taste." Later, he mentioned "murky" as a possibility, since "our understanding of the theory is, in fact, so primitive." Other physicists have suggested "matrix," "mother" (as in "mother of all theories"), and "masturbation." The skeptical Sheldon Glashow wondered whether the "M" wasn't an upside-down "W," for Witten.

Today, more than a decade after the second revolution, the theory formerly known as strings remains a seductive conjecture rather than an actual set of equations, and the non-uniqueness problem has grown to ridiculous proportions. At the latest count, the number of string theories is estimated to be something like one followed by five hundred zeros. "Why not just take this situation as a *reductio ad absurdum*?" Smolin asks. But some string theorists are unabashed: each member of this vast ensemble of alternative theories, they observe, describes a different possible universe, one with its own "local weather" and history. What if all these possible universes actually exist? Perhaps every one of them bubbled into being just as our universe did. (Physicists who believe in such a "multiverse" sometimes picture it as a cosmic champagne glass frothing with universe-bubbles.) Most of these universes will not be biofriendly, but a few will have precisely the right conditions for the emergence of intelligent life-forms like us. The fact that our universe appears to be fine-tuned to engender life is not a matter of luck. Rather, it is a consequence of the "anthropic principle": if our universe weren't the way it is, we wouldn't be here to observe it. Partisans of the anthropic principle say that it can be used to weed out all the versions of string theory that are incompatible with our existence, and so rescue string theory from the problem of non-uniqueness.

Copernicus may have dislodged man from the center of the universe, but the anthropic principle seems to restore him to that privileged position. Many physicists despise it; one has depicted it as a "virus" infecting the minds of his fellow-theorists. Others, including Witten, accept the anthropic principle, but provisionally and in a spirit of gloom. Still others seem to take perverse pleasure in it. The controversy among these factions has been likened by one participant to "a high-school-cafeteria food fight."

In their books against string theory, Smolin and Woit view the anthropic approach as a betrayal of science. Both agree with Karl Popper's dictum that if a theory is to be scientific it must be open to falsification. But string theory, Woit points out, is like Alice's Restaurant, where, as Arlo Guthrie's song had it, "you can get anything you want." It comes in so many versions that it predicts anything and everything. In that sense, string theory is, in the words of Woit's title, "not even wrong." Supporters of the anthropic principle, for their part, rail against the "Popperazzi" and insist that it would be silly for physicists to reject string theory because of what some philosopher said that science should be. Steven Weinberg, who has a good claim to be the father of the standard model of particle physics, has argued that anthropic reasoning may open a new epoch. "Most advances in the history of science have been marked by discoveries about nature," he recently observed, "but at certain turning points we have made discoveries about science itself."

Is physics, then, going postmodern? (At Harvard, as Smolin notes, the string-theory seminar was for a time actually called "Postmodern Physics.") The modern era of particle physics was empirical; theory developed in concert with experiment. The standard model may be ugly, but it works, so presumably it is at least an approximation of the truth. In the postmodern era, we are told, aesthetics must take over where experiment leaves off. Since string theory does not deign to be tested directly, its beauty must be the warrant of its truth.

In the past century, physicists who have followed their aesthetic sense in the absence of experimental data seem to have done quite well. As Paul Dirac said, "Anyone who appreciates the fundamental harmony connecting the way Nature runs and general mathematical principles must feel that a theory with the beauty and elegance of Einstein's theory has to be substantially correct." The idea that "beauty is truth, truth beauty" may be a beautiful one, but is there any reason to think it is true? Truth, after all, is a relationship between a theory and the world, whereas beauty is a relationship between a theory and the mind. Perhaps, some have conjectured, a kind of cultural Darwinism has drilled it into us to take aesthetic pleasure in theories that are more likely to be true. Or perhaps physicists are somehow inclined to choose problems that have beautiful solutions rather than messy ones. Or perhaps nature itself, at its most fundamental level, possesses an abstract beauty that a true theory is bound to mirror. What makes all these explanations suspect is that standards of theoretical beauty tend to be ephemeral, routinely getting overthrown in scientific revolutions. "Every property that has at some date been seen as aesthetically attractive in theories has at other times been judged as displeasing or aesthetically neutral," James W. McAllister, a philosopher of science, has observed.

The closest thing to an enduring mark of beauty is simplicity; Pythagoras and Euclid prized it, and contemporary physicists continue to pay lip service to it. All else being equal, the fewer the equations, the greater the elegance. And how does string theory do by this criterion? Pretty darn well, one of its partisans has facetiously observed, since the number of defining equations it has so far produced remains precisely zero. At first, string theory seemed the very Tao of simplicity, reducing all known particles and forces to the notes of a vibrating string. As one of its pioneers commented, "String theory was too beautiful a mathematical structure to be completely irrelevant to nature." Over the years, though, it has repeatedly had to be jury-rigged in the face of new difficulties, so that it has become a Rube Goldberg machine—or, rather, a vast landscape of them. Its proponents now inveigh against what they call "the myth of uniqueness and elegance." Nature is not simple, they maintain, nor should our ultimate theory of it be. "A good, honest look at the real world does not suggest a pattern of mathematical minimality," says the Stanford physicist Leonard Susskind, who seems to have no regrets about string theory's having "gone from being Beauty to the Beast."

If neither predictive value nor beauty explains the persistence of string theory, then what does? Since the late eighteenth century, no major scientific theory has been around for more than a decade without getting a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. Correct theories nearly always triumph quickly. But string theory, in one form or another, has been hanging on inconclusively for more than thirty-five years. Einstein's own pursuit of a unified theory of physics in the last three decades of his life is often cited as a case study in futility. Have a thousand string theorists done any better?

The usual excuse offered for sticking with what increasingly looks like a failed program is that no one has come up with any better ideas for unifying physics. But Smolin and Woit have a different explanation, one that can be summed up in the word "sociology." Both are worried that academic physics has become dangerously like what the social constructivists have long charged it with being: a community that is no more rational or objective than any other group of humans. String theorists dominate the country's top physics departments. At the Institute for Advanced Study, the director and nearly all of the particle physicists with permanent positions are string theorists. Eight of the nine MacArthur fellowships awarded to particle physicists over the years have gone to string theorists. Since the fall-off in academic hiring in the nineteen-seventies, the average age of tenured physics professors has reached nearly sixty. Every year, around eighty people receive Ph.D.s in particle physics, but only around ten of them can expect to get permanent jobs in the field. In this hypercompetitive environment, the only hope for a young theoretical physicist is to curry favor by solving a set problem in string theory. "Nowadays," one established figure in the field has said, "if you're a hot-shot young string theorist you've got it made."

Both authors also detect a cultlike aspect to the string-theory community, with Witten as the guru. Perhaps, it has been joked, physicists might have an easier time getting funding from the Bush Administration if they represented string theory as a "faith-based initiative." Smolin deplores what he considers to be the shoddy scientific standards that prevail in the string-theory community, where long-standing but unproved conjectures are assumed to be true because "no sensible person"—that is, no member of the tribe—doubts them. The most hilarious recent symptom of string theory's lack of rigor is the so-called Bogdanov Affair, in which French twin brothers, Igor and Grichka Bogdanov, managed to publish egregiously nonsensical articles on string theory in five peer-reviewed physics journals. Was it a reverse Sokal hoax? (In 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal fooled the editors of the postmodern journal *Social Text* into publishing an artful bit of drivel on the "hermeneutics of quantum gravity.") The Bogdanov brothers have indignantly denied it, but even the Harvard string-theory group was said to be unsure, alternating between laughter at the obviousness of the fraud and hesitant concession that the authors might have been sincere.

These two books present the case against string theory with wit and conviction, though Smolin's book is by far the more lucid and accessible. Woit has too many pages full of indigestible sentences like "The Hilbert space of the Wess-Zumino-Witten model is a representation not only of the Kac-Moody group, but of the group of conformal transformations as well." (Distressingly, he goes on to confess that this is "a serious oversimplification.") Let's assume that the situation in theoretical physics is as bad as Smolin and Woit say it is. What are non-physicists supposed to do about it? Should we form a sort of children's crusade to capture the holy land of physics from the string-theory usurpers? And whom should we install in their place?

Smolin furnishes the more definite answer. The current problem with physics, he thinks, is basically a problem of style. The initiators of the dual revolution a century ago—Einstein, Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg—were deep thinkers, or "seers." They confronted questions about space, time, and matter in a philosophical way. The new theories they created were essentially correct. But, Smolin writes, "the development of these theories required a lot of hard technical work, and so for several generations physics was 'normal science' and was dominated by master craftspeople." Today, the challenge of unifying those theories will require another revolution, one that mere virtuoso calculators are ill-equipped to carry out. "The paradoxical situation of string theory—so much promise, so little fulfillment—is exactly what you get when a lot of highly trained master craftspeople try to do the work of seers," Smolin writes.

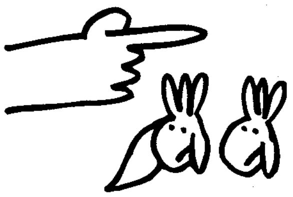
The solution is to cultivate a new generation of seers. And what, really, is standing in the way of that? Einstein, after all, didn't need to be nurtured by the physics establishment, and Smolin gives many examples of outsider physicists in the style of Einstein, including one who spent ten years in a rural farmhouse successfully reinterpreting general relativity. Neither Smolin nor Woit calls for the forcible suppression of string theory. They simply ask for a little more diversity. "We are talking about perhaps two dozen theorists," Smolin says. This is an exceedingly modest request, for theoretical physics is the cheapest of endeavors. Its practitioners require no expensive equipment. All they need is legal pads and pencils and blackboards and chalk to ply their trade, plus room and board and health insurance and a place to park their bikes. Intellectually daunting as the crisis in physics may be, its practical solution would seem to demand little more than the annual interest on the rounding error of a Google founder's fortune.

"How strange it would be if the final theory were to be discovered in our own lifetimes!" Steven Weinberg wrote some years ago, adding that such a discovery would mark the sharpest discontinuity in intellectual history since the beginning of modern science, in the seventeenth century. Of course, it is possible that a final theory will never be found, that neither string theory nor any of the alternatives mentioned by Smolin and Woit will come to anything. Perhaps the most fundamental truth about nature is simply beyond the human intellect, the way that quantum mechanics is beyond the intellect of a dog. Or perhaps, as Karl Popper believed, there will prove to be no end to the succession of deeper and deeper theories. And, even if a final theory is found, it will leave the questions about nature that most concern us—how the brain gives rise to consciousness, how we are constituted by our genes—untouched. Theoretical physics will be finished, but the rest of science will hardly notice. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Road, *by Cormac McCarthy (Knopf; $24).* In his new novel, McCarthy exchanges the bleak Western setting of previous works for an even bleaker post-apocalyptic one. As usual, lawless space engenders violence, but here a nuclear holocaust has reduced everything to ash, mummifying all but a few unlucky souls, who must kill or be killed (and eaten). The main characters are a father and his son, who was born a few nights after the bombs fell. "We're still the good guys," the man repeatedly assures the boy as they scavenge their way south for the winter, trying to avoid "bad guy" survival techniques. Even by McCarthy's standards, the horrors here—an infant "headless and gutted and blackening on the spit"—are extreme, and, deprived of historical context, his brutality can seem willful. But McCarthy's prose retains its ability to seduce—the deathscape is "like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world"—and there are nods to the gentler aspects of the human spirit.

Memorial, *by Bruce Wagner (Simon & Schuster; $26).* In this ambitious novel, four members of a Los Angeles family grapple with loneliness and pain while seeking financial and spiritual fulfillment. Joan is a minor architect striving to land the contract to design a memorial for two victims of the 2004 tsunami; her brother Chester hopes, after being injured during a prank reality show, to sue his way into a windfall. Their father, Ray, has his own lawsuit in the works, following a mistaken police raid on his house. Meanwhile, Marj, the matriarch, falls victim to an elaborate scam. Wagner sets up a delicate structural plan that mimics the family's progression from estrangement to a kind of intimacy. He comes close to overwhelming his characters with his own inimitable, trivia-dense voice, but ultimately he creates a tender vision of modern life, one in which preoccupations with popular culture are an imperfect carapace for the vulnerable hearts underneath.



Things I Didn't Know, *by Robert Hughes (Knopf; $27.95).* Hughes, the former art critic for *Time*, deftly intertwines personal and cultural history in this fiercely erudite memoir. As the youngest son in a prominent Sydney family, he recalls a childhood marked by a growing distance from family, church, and Australia but also by early signs of his aesthetic vocation: the "noble" form of a freshly caught fish fills him with "a first stirring of desire for the Ideal." Stifled by Australia's cultural isolation, he fled to Italy and, later, London, which provides the backdrop for a savagely comic parade of sixties grotesques, from hippies ("stupefied herbivores nattering about karma") to his first wife, whose "near-programmatic infidelity" reminded him of a "deranged alley cat." Framed as a "settling of accounts" with his native country, Hughes's story occasionally becomes self-indulgently sour, but it offers a fascinating examination of artistic patrimony and the formation of a critic.

John Wilkes, *by Arthur H. Cash (Yale; $37.50).* Wilkes is known to political historians as a radical bad boy of eighteenth-century Britain, and to literary historians for a cameo appearance in Boswell's life of Johnson. (Tricked into dining with the radical Wilkes, the arch-Tory Johnson found common ground in good food, Latin verse, and jokes about the Scots.) But Cash makes a persuasive case for Wilkes as central to Enlightenment England—and, indeed, to the American Revolution, whose ideas he helped inspire. Famous for his loose living, he turns out to be not the demagogic opportunist of the reactionary imagination but a philosophical democrat with articulate convictions about free speech and political equality. In the process of establishing Wilkes as genuinely heroic, Cash suggests new ways of thinking about the strange relationship between the practice of eighteenth-century libertinism and the birth of modern liberty.

BOOKS

DISPOSSESSION

Charles Frazier's second novel.

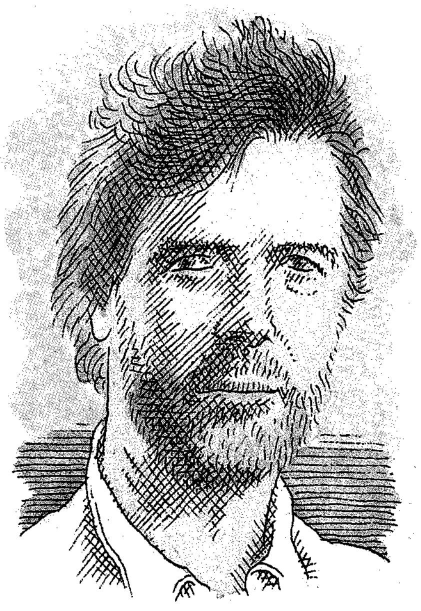
BY LOUIS MENAND

"Cold Mountain," Charles Frazier's first novel, came out in 1997 and was a huge best-seller. It won a National Book Award and was turned into a big-budget movie, written and directed by Anthony Minghella and starring Nicole Kidman and Jude Law. "Cold Mountain" is a Civil War story from the Southern point of view: a righteous but disillusioned Confederate soldier, named Inman, escapes from a military hospital in Virginia, where he is recovering from a wound suffered in the siege of Petersburg, and tries to walk all the way back to his home, in North Carolina, where his plucky girlfriend (her name is Ada) awaits him. On the road, he has to evade Yankee soldiers and local partisans hunting down deserters. He makes it back, but the partisans get him anyway.

Inman undergoes many perilous adventures (so does Ada), and the novel has a lot of suspense and variety for a story that is, basically, about a guy walking. Minghella's movie is faithful to the novel, but the book is a different experience, because Frazier is a stylist as well as a storyteller. His diction is an unclassifiable mélange of the regional, the archaic, and the nonce. "Their horses were foul spine-sprung things, malandered about the necks, beshat greenly across the hindquarters, and trailing ropy harls of yellow snot blown from all the orifices of their heads." I have no precise idea what "spine-sprung" means, or whether "malandered" and "harls" are actual words. But I see the horses.

Americans love Civil War stories, and many Americans especially love Civil War stories from the Southern point of view. "The Southern point of view," in popular fiction like "Cold Mountain," means something like "the point of view of people in local communities everywhere, making a living in the traditional ways, about to be flattened by the bulldozer of modern life." Casting the story in this light turns the Civil War into an allegory for the defeat of the crafted by the machine-made, the hearth by the factory, the folk by the mass. "One man I knew had been north to the big cities," Inman remarks at one point, "and he said it was every feature of such places that we were fighting to prevent."

The Southern point of view must not be confused with the *Confederate* point of view, which was a vision of an expanding slave empire in which businessmen operate vast plantations on assembly-line principles and hold absolute power over people whose ancestors had once, on another continent, belonged to local communities, made a living in the traditional ways, and so on. This elision—the suppression of a Confederate agenda that was at least as techno-imperialist as the Northern agenda is frequently accused of being—is an adjustment that white Americans grew comfortable with long ago. Edmund Wilson's "Patriotic Gore," an epic study of the literature of the Civil War, discusses only one African-American writer (Charlotte Forten), a principle of selection that has led a few critics to complain that Wilson knew everything about the Civil War except the reason it was fought. "Cold Mountain," which takes place entirely in the South, has neither black characters nor slaveholders, apart from a few walk-ons. It's as though nobody had any idea that *slavery* was tied up with this secession business. "Inman looked at the lights in the big houses at night and knew he had been fighting battles for such men as lived in them, and it made him sick." Who would have guessed?


Charles Frazier

"Cold Mountain" does, however, have Indians. They serve as the moral equivalents not of the enslaved Africans but of the rural white Southerners whose way of life is being obliterated by what they understand, too late, is really a War between the Suits: plantation owners versus factory owners. At the end of the novel, Inman and Ada are holed up in the mountains in a cabin abandoned years before by a family of Cherokee, and they seem to read their own plight in the plight of the Indians. "Though it is true that every age considers the world to be in a precarious state, at the very edge of dark, nevertheless Ada and Inman doubted if at any foretime in history the sense of an ending was as justified as it had been then. Those people's fears had been fully realized. The wider world had found them, even hidden here, and had fallen on them with all its weight."

The particular agent of the wider world referred to was the United States Army, which, in 1838, pursuant to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, forcibly relocated fifteen thousand Cherokee from their ancestral homes in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama to the territories, in what is now Oklahoma. Four thousand (maybe more) died in detention camps or on the journey, the "Trail of Tears." A small group, however, managed to remain. Several hundred of these lived in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina on land owned by a white man, William Holland Thomas. Thomas had been adopted by a Cherokee clan when he was a boy. A self-taught lawyer, he represented the Cherokee in Washington, D.C., during the debate over removal, and in 1839 he was named a Cherokee chief. He later served in the state legislature, won and lost a fortune, led a band of soldiers (Thomas's Legion) in the Civil War, and died in an insane asylum. This unusual character was the inspiration for Frazier's new novel, "Thirteen Moons" (Random House; $26.95).

Frazier emphasizes, in an Author's Note, that he has taken liberties with the facts; still, "Thirteen Moons" is a historical novel, based on real people and events. Conventionally, historical fiction is a personal story with world-historical rear-screen projection—the love story of Inman and Ada against the backdrop of the Civil War. The protagonist is usually a reflector, not an actor, an ordinary man or woman whose life is blown off course by the storm of great events. This is the conventional method because it is the prudent method: the writer does not have to imagine what it was like to be Robert E. Lee or Abraham Lincoln, only what it might have been like to be a righteous but disillusioned Confederate deserter in love with a plucky girl. The protagonist of "Thirteen Moons," though, is a character based on William Holland Thomas. He's given the name Will Cooper, and the story is told by him, in the first person, looking back on his life from the asylum.

Like "Cold Mountain," a lot of "Thirteen Moons" is episodic, a string of adventure stories—about hunting or fighting or other kinds of hostile encounter. But there are two more or less independent plot lines. One concerns Cooper's intervention on behalf of the Cherokee during the time of the removal; it reaches a climax when Cooper is obliged to sacrifice a family of Indians in exchange for a promise that the ones on his land will be permitted to stay. The other plot concerns a love interest named Claire, a moody gamine whom twelve-year-old Cooper wins in a card game with a larger-than-life white-skinned Cherokee called Featherstone. Claire lives with Featherstone in an ambiguous role somewhere between daughter and wife, and she flits mysteriously in and out of Cooper's life—ultimately, out.

There are successful scenes along the way, and, as in "Cold Mountain," the world of the Appalachian forest primeval is brought to life. But neither of the plot lines is effective, and the problem is Cooper. He's too important an actor in the historical drama, so he can reflect on it but he cannot reflect it; and he's too eccentric a figure in the private drama. In Frazier's rendering, he is somehow a woodsman, a wheeler-dealer, and a fop. Cooper is orphaned as a child, and his aunt and uncle sell him into service when he is twelve. He makes his way, alone, to a wilderness trading post, where local Cherokee take him up and adopt him. He is already a genius of culture—he knows Latin, and carries a copy of the Aeneid with him into the woods—and he quickly proves himself a genius at commerce as well, transforming the trading post into a thriving business. He can live on the trail, knows how to kill and barbecue a squirrel, carries Tuscan wine in his rucksack, and indulges, of an evening, in "Smollett's rendition of the Quixote." He chats with Featherstone (a feared killer who is also a grand plantation owner, and whose favorite book is "The Anatomy of Melancholy") about literature and the *North American Review*. He says stuff like "One of the few welcome lessons age teaches is that only desire trumps time" (which seems, incidentally, exactly the opposite of what age teaches).

Cooper's passion for Claire is unexplained, but it is, after all, a passion, so that is forgivable. But Claire herself is unexplained, except as an incarnation of the eternal feminine (sexual-athlete subdivision), and their style of lovemaking is not something it is easy to identify with. Here is a characteristic passage of Cooper's reminiscences:

> Out in the river, breaking its black flow, I could see a big flat rock where Claire and I had once waded waist-deep and sat face-to-face cross-legged in the humid aftermath of a July thunderstorm eating red pepper jelly on water crackers with a good white Italian wine from Featherstone's cellar. The wine's maker I fail to recollect, though if I quit chasing after it maybe it will come back to me. But I do remember that we touched each other fairly personally and discussed the weaknesses of Byron's rhyming in certain stanzas of "Don Juan."

Ick. The trouble here is a trouble throughout: absence of irony. There is too much lapidary sententiousness, too much moral reverb, in the prose. It is meant to be Cooper's voice, of course; but, though we often wish we could, we cannot get outside of it. We could take the characters more seriously if the author took them less seriously.

Frazier has two strengths that preserve his writing from the sentimentalism on the brink of which it otherwise teeters. One is a gift for violence. He describes brutality in a manner that is both clinical and off-hand—as though the most murderous act were nothing special, a thing that happens all the time. He can achieve chilling effects, as he does in the scenes with the partisans in "Cold Mountain." There is—strangely, given the historical setting—far less violence in "Thirteen Moons." The account of the actual removal of the Cherokee, when we finally arrive there, is rather muted and perfunctory, and the terrible bargain that Cooper makes to keep his land is ethically unfocussed. This is partly a consequence of letting Cooper serve as his own narrator: he is too fond of his own complexity. He talks too much.

Frazier's other virtue follows from the first. He is a Darwinian. Killing is, indeed, no big deal, a thing that happens all the time, because the survival of some depends on the death of others. There is a great deal of hyper-meticulous nature writing in both of Frazier's novels; his special obsession is wilderness cooking. Some of the meals his characters scrounge up out in the woods sound positively three-star. (Well, two-star.) But the point is always made: if you want to eat it, you must kill it first. So it is with people: finally, getting by is possible only at the expense of others. And, since this has always been the law of the world, there was no pre-lapsarian moment when human affairs were not, at bottom, about taking and killing. "While it might have been romance to those old hunters," Cooper says, thinking of the tales of Daniel Boone, "really it was business." Daniel Boone killed him a b'ar, but he was after the fur.

The Cherokee, too, are not ruined by the removal, in Frazier's account; they were ruined already. "They were damaged people," Frazier has Cooper say, "and they lived in a broken world." This is consistent with the description of the rural Southerners in "Cold Mountain": there is nothing especially nice or admirable about them. They are abusive, violent, drunken, lecherous, hardscrabble, ignorant people. The only line on which authorial sympathy is extended to them is that, in spite of all, they were once in control of their own fate, hard as that fate was. Then the bulldozers came. ♦

THE THEATRE

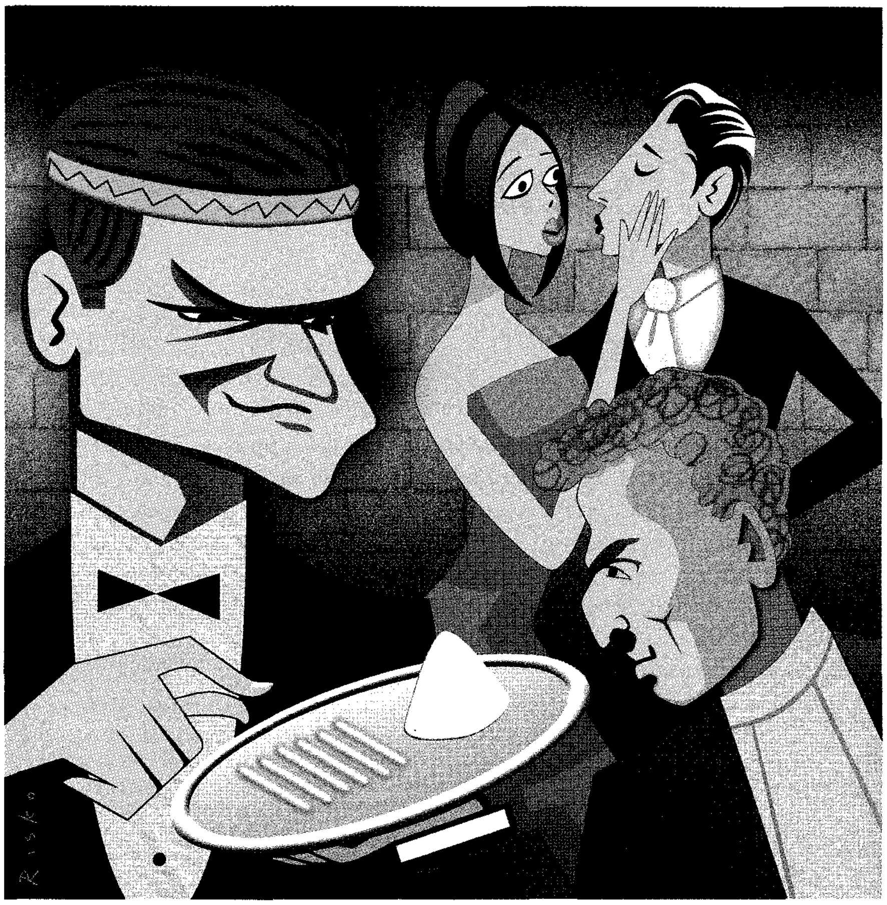
KINGDOM COME

Michael Cumpsty reinterprets the downfall of Richard II.

BY HILTON ALS

After spending time with Shakespeare's tragedies, some people may find themselves peering at their once familiar world through the Bard's lush, bleak lens, which makes every word or gesture heavy with meaning and premonition. When one is in such a state, biting into a plum tomato can portend bloody vengeance. Children playing in the sun can seem like bright souls hurtling toward extinction. And cancelling plans with a lover in order to fulfill an obligation to a less-valued friend can engender the feeling that the Duke of York expresses so exquisitely in the vexing and profound "Richard II" (now at the Classic Stage Company): "As in a theatre, the eyes of men, / After a well-graced actor leaves the stage, / Are idly bent on him that enters next, / Thinking his prattle to be tedious." Certainly the majority of Richard II's once loyal subjects have grown tired of their childish monarch's prattle by the time the Duke of York (George Morfogen) delineates his loss of power this way, toward the beginning of Act V. Still, we find by the end of this act that Richard (Michael Cumpsty) has managed to move us, despite all the confusing emotion and poor judgment exercised by this "plaster saint," as John Gielgud, who directed the play in 1937, described him.

"Richard II" was written in 1595, two centuries after the King's rule ended, and the same year that Shakespeare produced such finely constructed plays as "Romeo and Juliet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Yet "Richard" reads at times like the unfinished work of an overextended author. The first half of the play, especially, feels unrealized; it's as if the text had been sewn together from two separate plays entirely—a somewhat dull court drama and an early take on the existential themes that Shakespeare parlayed with unquestionable brilliance, four or five years later, in "Hamlet." Still, wily, intelligent actors, such as Derek Jacobi and Jeremy Irons, have been drawn to the part, perhaps less for the play itself than for what they hope to do with it: bring cohesion to a role that Shakespeare himself couldn't quite pull into focus. Cumpsty won an Obie last spring for his portrayal of Hamlet (also at the C.S.C.), and his Richard is a similarly divided character—an overgrown boy, living in a feckless man's body.



Richard and his queen and courtiers seem like refugees from a Noël Coward play.

As the play opens, Richard's court is rife with suspicion: the beloved Duke of Gloucester—one of Richard's uncles—has been murdered. While it is generally understood that Richard commanded his subject Thomas Mowbray (the captivating Craig Baldwin) to arrange Gloucester's execution, in order to consolidate his own political power, no one—especially not the remaining members of Richard's royal family—dares, at first, to confront the King; by this time in England's long and troubled history, monarchs were considered nothing less than messengers of God's will. Richard's more mature and traditional cousin Henry Bolingbroke (the powerfully built Graham Winton) copes with his rage by projecting it onto Mowbray instead, challenging him to a duel. But, before the two men can fight, Richard exiles them both. For Richard, one of the best things about being king is his sovereign right to reduce the most complicated problems to the size of little annoyances.

In Brian Kulick's imaginative staging, Richard, after sending his adversaries off to whatever fate awaits them across the sea, is seen living it up with his wife, the French-born Queen Isabel (the lovely Doan Ly), and some of his favorite courtiers. Grooving to music in the Rudy Vallée vein—Kulick has set the production sometime in the twentieth century—Richard snorts line after line of cocaine with no apparent awareness that the party will someday have to end. (The

ROBERT RISKO

group seem like refugees from Noël Coward's 1924 play about coke addiction and indolence, "The Vortex.") Cumpsty's Richard is not even sure how to wear his crown. He likes the look of it, but wonders whether it will go with this or that outfit. Is there nothing more to this man than his impulses? Like a number of Shakespeare's other fractured protagonists, Richard is a creature of fashion; he places great store in appearances. He has a beautiful wife, a nice house, servants at his beck and call. What more could he want? To become a thinker would be to disrupt the universe as he knows it, with its outward flash and easy pleasures.

Harold Bloom, in his 1998 book "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human," writes, "Since we are not meant to like Richard, and no one could like the usurper Bolingbroke, Shakespeare has little trouble distancing us from the only actions of the play, abdication and murder." Indeed, by the time Bolingbroke gathers his forces, ousts the petulant King, and claims the throne, it hardly matters to us. Richard is not part of the drama; he is just the intermittent cause of it, peripheral to our experience of the play—until, that is, he suffers the loss of his kingdom, his wife, and his holdings, and embarks on his transformation from spoiled monarch to indigent poet. Here, in Acts III and V, in soliloquies of breathtaking angst that Cumpsty fully inhabits, Richard becomes more human, or, at least, more of a character with whom we can identify, thanks primarily to Cumpsty's performance. Before Richard's defeat and abdication, Cumpsty plays him as a mere figure of fantasy who seems to belong to another play altogether—a secondary character in, say, "All's Well That Ends Well." Once Richard is imprisoned, however, with his long body folding in on itself, stripped of his dark suit and shiny dance-school shoes, he shows us the burden of awareness:

> I have been studying how I may compare
> This prison where I live unto the world;
> And for because the world is populous,
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
> My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
> My soul the father, and these two beget
> A generation of still-breeding thoughts;
> And these same thoughts people this little
>   world,
> In humours like the people of this world:
> For no thought is contented.

Richard puts aside his vanity—opens his heart and mind sufficiently—to understand ours. In prison, he is a martyr to time wasted; now that he has finally begun to think, he has too little time left to complete his thoughts.

Cumpsty doesn't defend Richard in his moments of self-awareness. He doesn't, at the end of Richard's life, try to make us forget the foolishness that has come before. Sitting quietly in Tom Gleeson's brilliant Gilbert-and-George-inspired set, he is still immersed in Richard's perverse self-regard. But he somehow manages to knit together the two halves of Shakespeare's discordant, ultimately minor work, and he makes us see the wonder and the sadness of coming to realize too much too late—a failure that many of us share with his defeated king.

Bruce Norris's "The Pain and the Itch" (at Playwrights Horizons) is one of the most satisfying theatrical events available today. See it. It's not only that Norris—the author of more than half a dozen plays and an occasional actor himself—writes with an ear that is especially attuned to the absurdities of everyday speech. He also writes with a mind that is attuned to the blindness that passes for a shared vision among the emotionally smug and upwardly mobile. Set in the Ikea-furnished home of Clay (Christopher Evan Welch) and Kelly (Mia Barron), a thirty-something couple who can barely stand each other but still feel compelled to produce their own objects of status and well-being—children—the play is as much about Clay and Kelly's manipulations and prejudices as it is about their misguided perception of themselves: that they're liberal and thus compassionate. Nonsense. Hatred and barely suppressed anger fill every line that every character speaks—beautifully.

"The Pain and the Itch" is so well directed by Anna D. Shapiro that you hardly notice her work. You are aware, instead, of the play's fundamental elegance. While the seven-member cast works together seamlessly, two actors deserve special mention: Barron and Aya Cash, who plays the Eastern European girlfriend of Kelly's piggish brother-in-law. Together, they give Norris's words so much twisted life that it would be pure gluttony to ask for more. ♦

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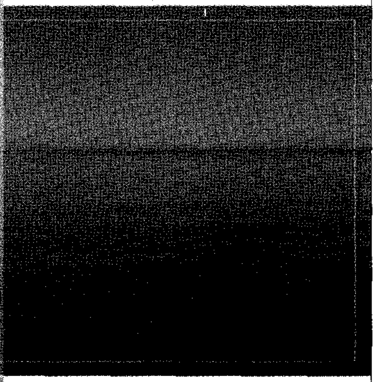

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POP MUSIC

THE CLOSER

Ludacris's new album.

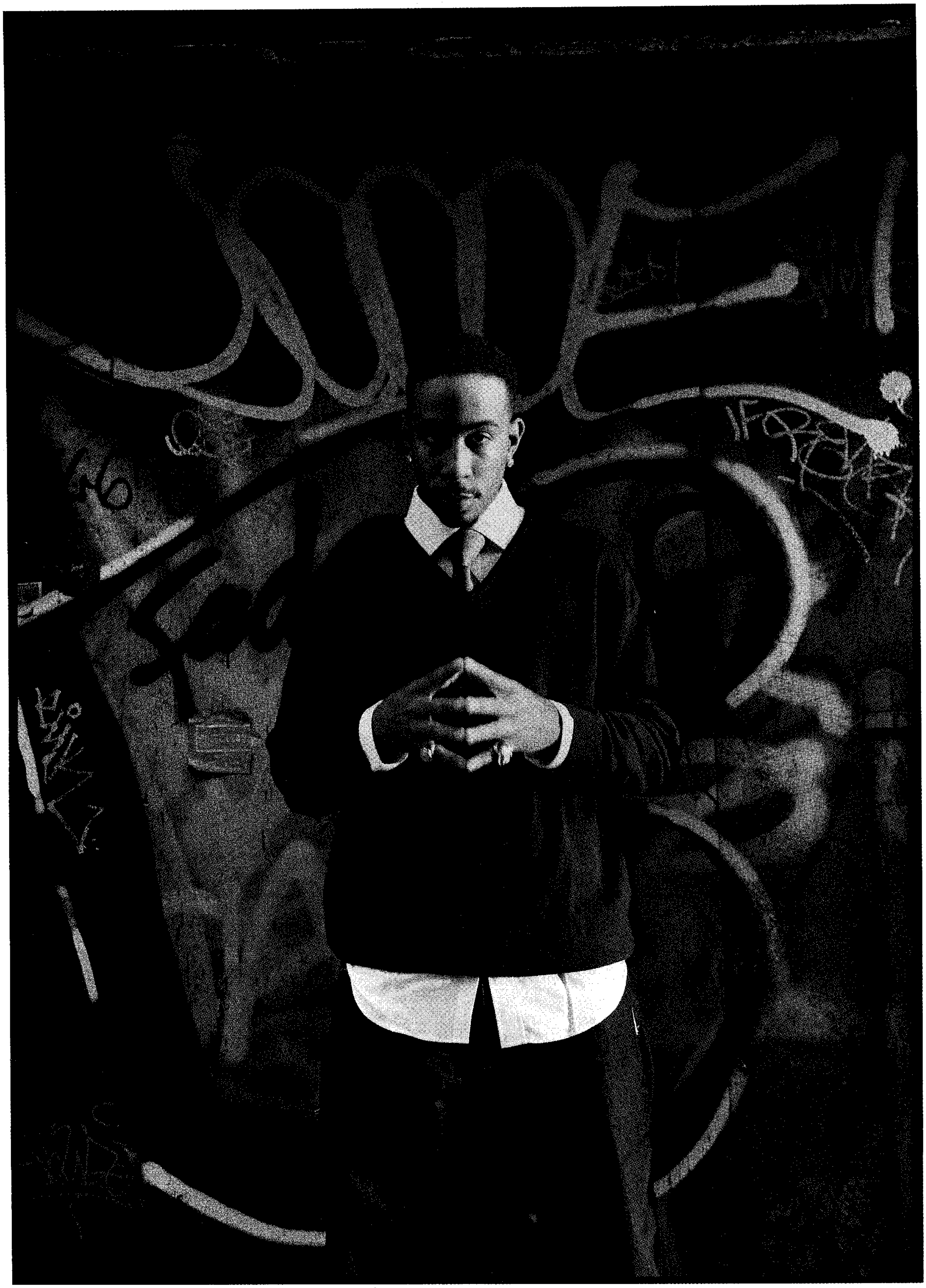
BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

Chris (Ludacris) Bridges, the twenty-nine-year-old m.c. and actor, is perhaps best understood not in the context of other rappers but in that of a sports figure: the Yankees' closer Mariano Rivera. Nobody complains that Rivera doesn't pitch entire games—he can insure victory in an inning. Ludacris's best work is similar; in just six years, he has appeared on more than forty tracks by other artists, contributing sixteen-bar verses that are often clever and rowdy enough to make you forget everyone else on the song. As he puts it, in typically blunt fashion, on "Blow It Out" (from his 2003 album, "Chicken–N–Beer"), "All these rappers want to know what I'm getting for sixteen: try eighty. Want a discount? Blow it out your ass." Ludacris can erase three dull minutes in forty perfect seconds. (The skill applies equally to his acting: as a bilious carjacker in "Crash" and as a rapper in "Hustle & Flow," he proved that he doesn't need much time to make an impression.)

Usher's hugely popular 2004 single "Yeah!," about a trip to a dance club, features a classic cameo by Ludacris, in which he upstages his host and gets the girl—or at least brags that he will. Usher sings family-friendly lyrics about mingling with girls at the club. When one responds to his overtures, he hesitates in a gentlemanly fashion: "If I take that chance, just where's it gonna lead?" Ludacris, leering between Usher's Colgate smiles, seizes his chance: "Forget about game—I'm a spit the truth. I won't stop 'til I get 'em in they birthday suits." A former Atlanta radio personality, he expels his words with bracing oomph, confident as usual of his appeal and unembarrassed by his ribaldry. Here his lewdness makes Usher look innocent by comparison, a trick apparently worth eighty thousand dollars. (Ludacris may be selling himself too cheap. On his 2005 track "That's My Shit," he declares that "a song's worth a million once I lend my fucking voice to it." In the case of "Yeah!," which was the No. 1 song for twelve weeks, this might not be an exaggeration.)

This is not to say that Ludacris can't make an album; simply that the five he has made are not the measure of his talent. (This distinction is especially true for Ludacris, but it is becoming the rule for hip-hop. In the era of the mixtape, when dozens of songs appear each month only on semi-legal but widely distributed homemade CDs, major-label releases have become secondary texts, summarizing a year or two of an m.c.'s activity.) Ludacris provides dependable comic relief. His metaphors and double entendres ("stay on the track, hit the ground runnin', like Flo-Jo"; "money keeps flowin' like Niagara Falls") are comprehensible to any bright and corruptible ten-year-old. He is a fellow in filth to both contemporary standup comics and twentieth-century bluesmen, for whom a jelly roll is never just a pastry and a back-door man is never simply a repairman. But his booming voice and punch lines can be tedious over the length of an album, and what is vulgar and funny in one song can become offensive over twelve. When he appears on a track like Missy Elliott's 2001 single "One Minute Man," a brusque complaint about unsatisfying lovers, his cocksure patter is wish fulfillment for her aggressive sexual fantasies. ("Just cause I'm an all-nighter, shoot all fire, Ludacris: balance and rotate all tires.") When he's merely trying to fulfill himself, well, then it's a party of one.

Ludacris's new album, "Release Therapy," is, thankfully, a concise demonstration of his midnight-blue humor and bumptious oratory. The



Ludacris is at his best on other rappers' songs; he can erase three dull minutes in forty perfect seconds. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

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first single is called "Money Maker," and, like the blues singer Elmore James before him, Ludacris encourages women to shake their money-makers—that physical asset which "took your mama nine months to make," and which, if you're a fan of doughnuts, may be bigger than a breadbox. Pharrell Williams, of the Neptunes, contributes a delightful, percussive beat reminiscent of eighties Washington, D.C., go-go, and helps sing the chorus in a pleasantly undemonstrative way. However, none of this inspires Ludacris to more than run-of-the-mill bawdiness: "You, you lookin' good in them jeans—I bet you'd look even better with me in between." It's a relief that Ludacris has developed a better grip on the line between raunchy and revolting. His guest verse on Method Man's 2004 song "Rodeo," for example, suggests a vision of sex that is simultaneously coercive, boring, and hard to clean up: "I get my nuts pushed, from the bottom to the top of your gums, I feel your slurpin', slurpin', I'm skeetin' and squirtin' your tongue." It's apparent on "Release Therapy" that Ludacris knows he needs more than sex talk to fill an album, but he can't always find a substitute.

Money, the album's other principal obsession, makes better copy. "Tell It Like It Is," a low, rattling song built around a sequence of kick drums, finds Ludacris appropriately revved up, not about a woman or a rival but about his peers' naïveté when it comes to the music business. "How you own three cars but you don't own your own name?" he scolds. Announcing that "class is in session," he proceeds to dispense small-business advice: "Start up your own company, trademark the name—that's gonna run you 'bout a grand, so start saving your change." When discussing the rapper Chingy, a former protégé who accused Ludacris and Disturbing Tha Peace, the record label he co-founded, of financial misdeeds, he sounds more intimidating than his gun-wielding friends, possibly because he's genuinely hurt. "We never took no money from Chingy," he bellows. "Thought I was cool with him. I wish his ass well, but I don't want *nothing* to do with him." It's a rare and welcome display of emotion—the kind of thing he might say if he ran into Chingy.

To his credit, Ludacris rejects the common hip-hop ploy of play-acting a criminal past—on "War With God," a blustering song about self-doubt, he declares, "Never sold cocaine in my life but I'm still the fucking man." For the most part, though, "Release Therapy" drags down Ludacris's natural vigor with soggy R. & B. come-ons and a series of sententious set pieces. "Runaway Love," for example, is a puffy ballad about unloved young girls that wastes the immense charm of the R. & B. singer Mary J. Blige on a predictable and maudlin scenario ("Mama's always gone, and she never met her daddy"). "Slap" is a weirdly inert dramatization of the everyday frustrations of a nine-to-five worker featuring some baffling heavy-metal guitar histrionics straight out of 1987; and "Freedom of Preach" is an informal gospel song on which Ludacris unconvincingly apologizes for the taunts that have made him a millionaire—"I'm sorry for the hip-hop beefs, we sorry for the drama." Since Ludacris is paid to ratchet up the drama on other people's songs, it is hard to take his contrition seriously.

Instead of buying "Release Therapy," download Ludacris's latest guest verse, recorded—one hopes at a discount—for Shareefa, an artist signed to Ludacris's label. Two minutes into Shareefa's single "Need a Boss," Ludacris swaggers into the track, sounding twice the size of anyone else in the room: "Fifteen bank accounts, ten different businesses, five different lawyers, tell 'em what the business is. I live down the block, was raised up the street. Want beef? I'll do like summertime and raise up the heat." As he does every few months, Ludacris turns an average party song into a party that you want to get into but can't afford. Unless you happen to have eighty thousand dollars lying around. ♦

DON'T GIVE IT A SECOND THOUGHT DEPARTMENT

From the Chester (N.J.) Observer-Tribune.

Virginia H. Krementz died in New Vernon, not Vero Beach, Fla. Dice, tennis balls and playing cards were not placed in her coffin, but elsewhere.

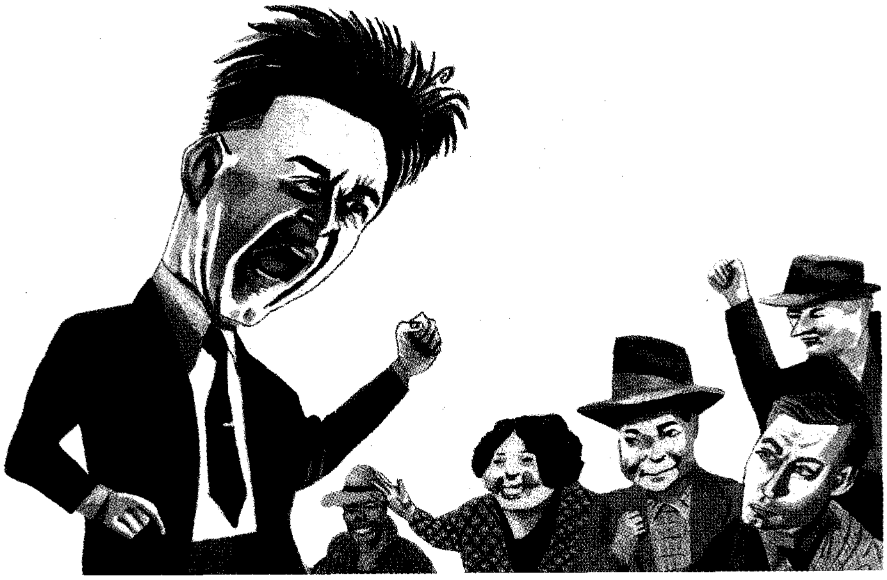
THE CURRENT CINEMA

POWER PLAYERS

"All the King's Men" and "The Last King of Scotland."

BY DAVID DENBY

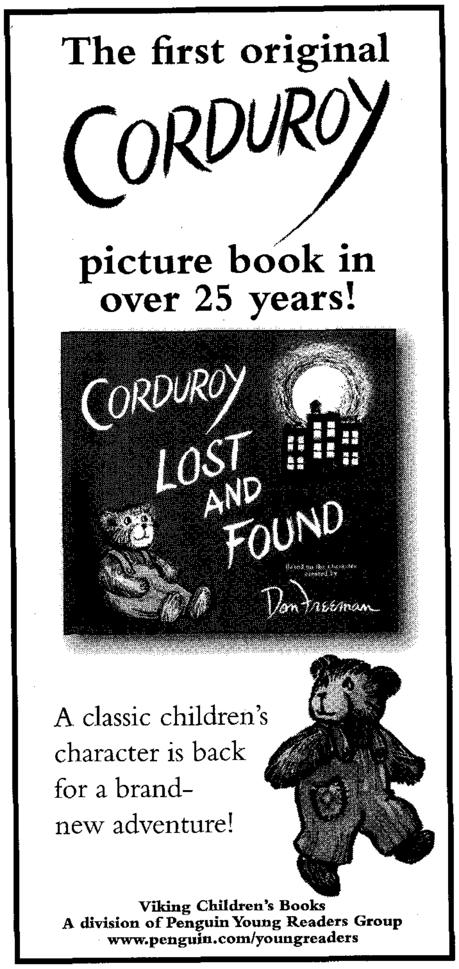
In the new version of "All the King's Men," Sean Penn, as Willie Stark, the Southern country boy who wants to be governor, wears his hair cropped close at the sides and standing up straight on top. With that coxcomb roof, Penn looks constantly aroused by Stark's eagerness to conquer. The performance begins quietly and builds into a kind of permanent uproar. Like Robert Rossen's 1949 version, this grandiose movie, written and directed by Steven Zaillian, is based on Robert Penn Warren's extraordinary 1946 novel about the eruptive life of the Louisiana governor and senator Huey P. Long. Willie Stark begins his career as a lawyer and local official, and, as he sizes people up, gauging weakness and strength, Penn seems wary, even recessive, but you can tell from the set of his mouth that he's thinking malevolent thoughts. When Willie's speeches fail to excite much interest, Penn lets loose: his neck cords bulge, his voice becomes coarse, as if his throat were lined with broken glass, and his hands, circling each other rapidly, suddenly shoot out to the side, repelling evil capitalists and corrupt politicians. "You're a *hick!*" he screams at the tired-looking country people listening to him, "and ain't nobody ever helped a hick but a hick hisself." Willie promises schools, roads, and bridges. Attacks on him by other politicians are, he says, attacks on the people. In a montage of speeches, we see the populist turn into a demagogue.



Sean Penn as Willie Stark with Jude Law (right) as his confidant and hatchet man.

MARK ULRIKSEN

Huey Long became governor in 1928 and was dead by 1935, but Zaillian, trying not to let the material recede too far into the past, updates the period to the fifties. Rampaging around town in a double-breasted suit, a hat covering that rooster hair, Penn walks with his gut thrust out, his arms swinging at his sides. He gives a strenuous, at times shrewd and acid performance, which has been embedded, unfortunately, in a clumsy and ineffective movie. Rossen's film, which won the best-picture Oscar, is terse, rowdy, and melodramatic; it surges ahead like one of those gangster movies from the thirties which chronicled the abrupt rise and the more abrupt fall of a noisy thug with a fondness for broads and tailored suits. Broderick



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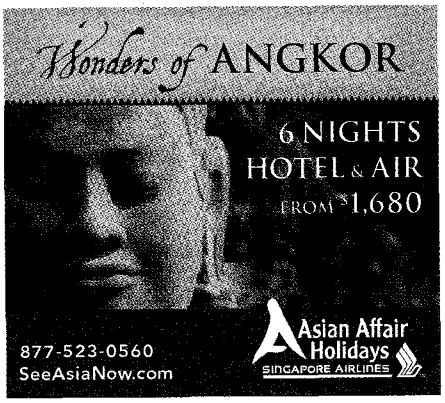

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Crawford, who played Willie, was a big, heavy-set man with jowls and a menacing snarl. A less accomplished actor than Penn, he was a more natural fit for the part. But Rossen didn't much bother with authenticity. You can't tell where the movie is supposed to be taking place—it could be the Midwest—and the actors make no attempt at Southern accents.

Zaillian, on the other hand, shot in Louisiana and made extensive use of the enormous building in Baton Rouge that Huey Long constructed as the state capitol in the early thirties. Fervent about physical detail, Zaillian, who directed "Searching for Bobby Fischer" and "A Civil Action," lays on the Southern atmosphere—the dark leather and brass fixtures of administrative offices, the mists shrouding the sins of old country mansions, the rounded black Dodge sedans racing down damp roads at night. But the fable is clear only in outline: a man of the people with good intentions falls in love with power, and corrupts himself and everyone around him. In Rossen's film, we see what Willie actually did—the public works he created and the strong-arming and bribery that became a way of life. In Zaillian's, we hear Willie's boasts about what he's going to do, and we hear a lot of talk about the opposition to him in the legislature. But we don't see much. Does Willie accomplish anything? If he does, is graft the only way to do it? Who are his opponents—men under the control of oil interests? Audiences might come away from the movie thinking that he is more sinned against than sinning, that his populism is genuine and that legislators dislike him because he taxes the rich and teases routine political hypocrisy by roguishly appealing to the worst in everyone.

What seems to attract Zaillian's interest is not the politics but the social subtext of Penn Warren's novel—the way a crude country pol with boundless energy mesmerizes the feeble remnants of the old Southern aristocracy. Willie is seen through the eyes of Jack Burden (Jude Law), an outcast from a wealthy family who works as a newspaperman. Jack joins up with Willie and becomes his confidant and his hatchet man. As always, Jude Law is charming but not nearly as forceful as you want him to be. Asexual and unambitious, Jack doesn't have much of a self to violate—he suffers little guilt over the perfidies he commits on Willie's behalf—and Law's performance drifts off into inconsequence. The center of the movie becomes an insoluble mystery—the bond between two utterly different men. There are long, irresolute scenes as well with Jack's ineffably cultivated childhood friends Anne (Kate Winslet) and Adam Stanton (Mark Ruffalo). Winslet is shot behind gauzy white curtains, as if this grown woman were still the innocent girl of years earlier—a conceit that should be treated ironically, since Anne is having an affair with Willie Stark. Mark Ruffalo, allegedly playing a doctor, sits noodling at a piano and mumbling; he doesn't look as if he could fix a hangnail. Anthony Hopkins, as a tough-minded old judge with a slab of white hair, and James Gandolfini and Patricia Clarkson, as political operatives, perform with professional skill, but they all sink into Louisiana accents thicker than any bayou swamp. (I understood maybe two-thirds of the dialogue.) Zaillian indulges in passages of languorous funk and ornate literary reflection, and then suddenly jerks us out of the passive, self-regarding moods with a cut to a car hurtling along or a brassy swell of James Horner's music, which is overbearing throughout. The director can't seem to find a natural rhythm for the movie—it's portentous and vague at the same time. Ambiguity is rare in American movies, and it seems unfair to complain of it, but most of these characters are so balled up they don't know what they want. Willie Stark does, of course, and it's too bad Zaillian didn't tell us more about him. The moral collapse of a potentially honorable man is handled so negligently that it seems almost a cliché.

Jack Burden suffers from an insufficiency of ego and finds himself in thrall to a bully. In "The Last King of Scotland," Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy), a fledgling Scottish doctor, is also drawn to a bully, but for very different reasons. The doctor, who has pale-blue eyes and a mop of orange-brown hair, is ready for anything; he has the kind of resourcefulness and looks that cause people to forgive mistakes in a young man, and Nick makes a few. Working in Uganda right out of medical school in 1971, he winds up mending a bruised hand belonging to none other than General Idi Amin Dada (Forest Whitaker), who has just overthrown the previous regime and established supreme power for himself. The doctor's self-possession endears him to the dictator, who quickly demands that Nick become his private physician and adviser.

The General, too, promised roads and bridges to "the people"; he even delivered a few, along with hundreds of thousands of corpses, and Whitaker, in the performance of a lifetime, makes him a charismatic madman. Whitaker has done some surpassingly gentle and rueful work in the past, but for this role he has transformed himself—he's either sprawled in a stupor or alarmingly mobile, throwing his big body around the room as if it weighed nothing. His laugh is enormous, and his arms are like grappling hooks. This dictator has a terrifying affability: like many sociopaths, he can be surprisingly empathic. He figures out what people want, but, once they have received his generosity, he believes that they belong to him. Any check on his desires sends him into a rage, and, as Whitaker takes off into astonishing tirades, one eye opens wide, and the other droops viciously—even his vision is schizoid. The director, Kevin Macdonald, a Scot who had previously made documentaries ("One Day in September" and "Touching the Void"), concentrates on the relationship of the two men, and makes something tense and alive out of it. Every time Nick escapes danger, he feels relieved. He's ensnared by the luxuries and the power, but also by gratitude—he has earned the favor of a murderer, and what could make a cocky young man feel more like a winner?

The movie is based on a novel by Giles Foden, who grew up in Africa and concocted the doctor out of several real-world figures, including a Scot who treated Amin for a while. Amin, who was partly reared by British colonial troops, loved the Scots, and, when he became President, he established bonny rituals in which members of his Army would parade up and down in kilts and tartan. Nick sees Amin's follies but not the extent of the purges and the slaughter—"The Last King of Scotland" is driven forward by his stupidity. He gets his comeuppance, of course, but, after this movie and "The Constant Gardener," one would like to whisper ever so gently into the ears of all Western filmmakers that Africa, in its tragic condition, is perhaps not the most appropriate place to stage the moral redemption of dopey Europeans. ♦

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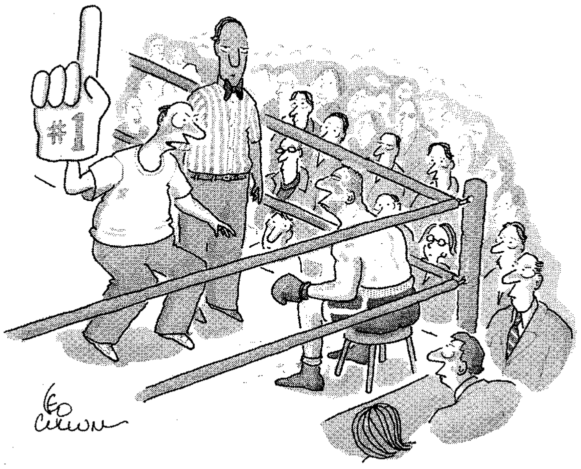
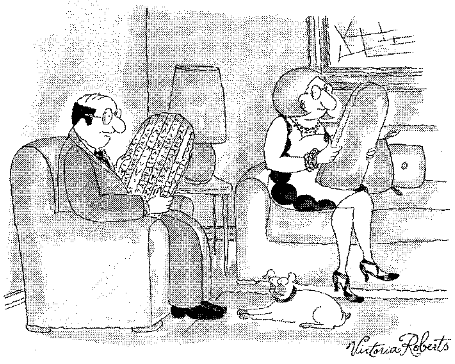
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Jack Ziegler, must be received by Sunday, October 1st. Finalists in the September 18th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 16th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Two? Close enough—give 'em hell!"
Marcia Kaufman, Natick, Mass.



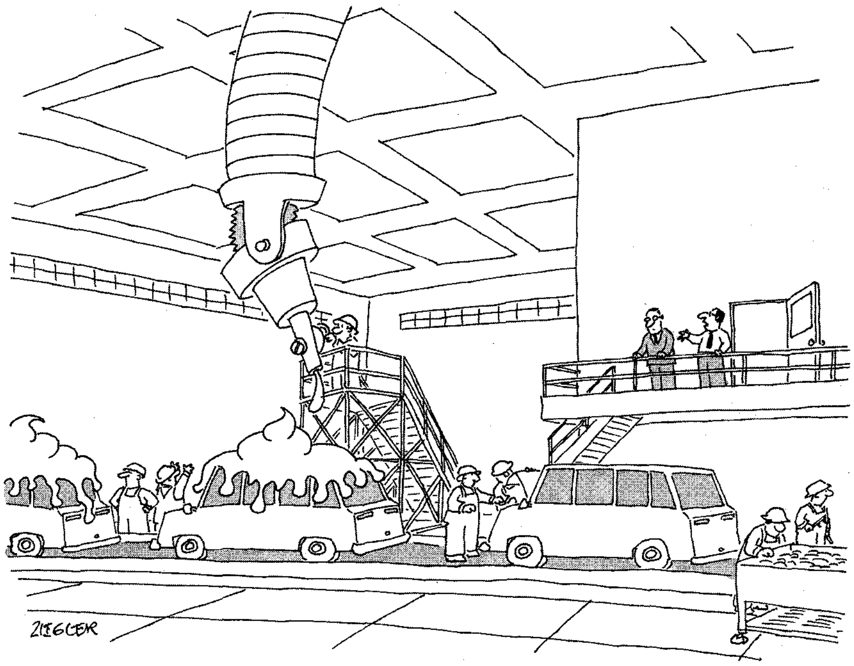
THE FINALISTS

"There's something about holding a rock
in your hands that newspapers can't replace."
Bernie Hunhoff, Yankton, S.D.

"Same old, same old."
Kate Steinbacher, Roanoke, Va.

"Wait, this is yesterday's."
Alex Wellen, Washington, D.C.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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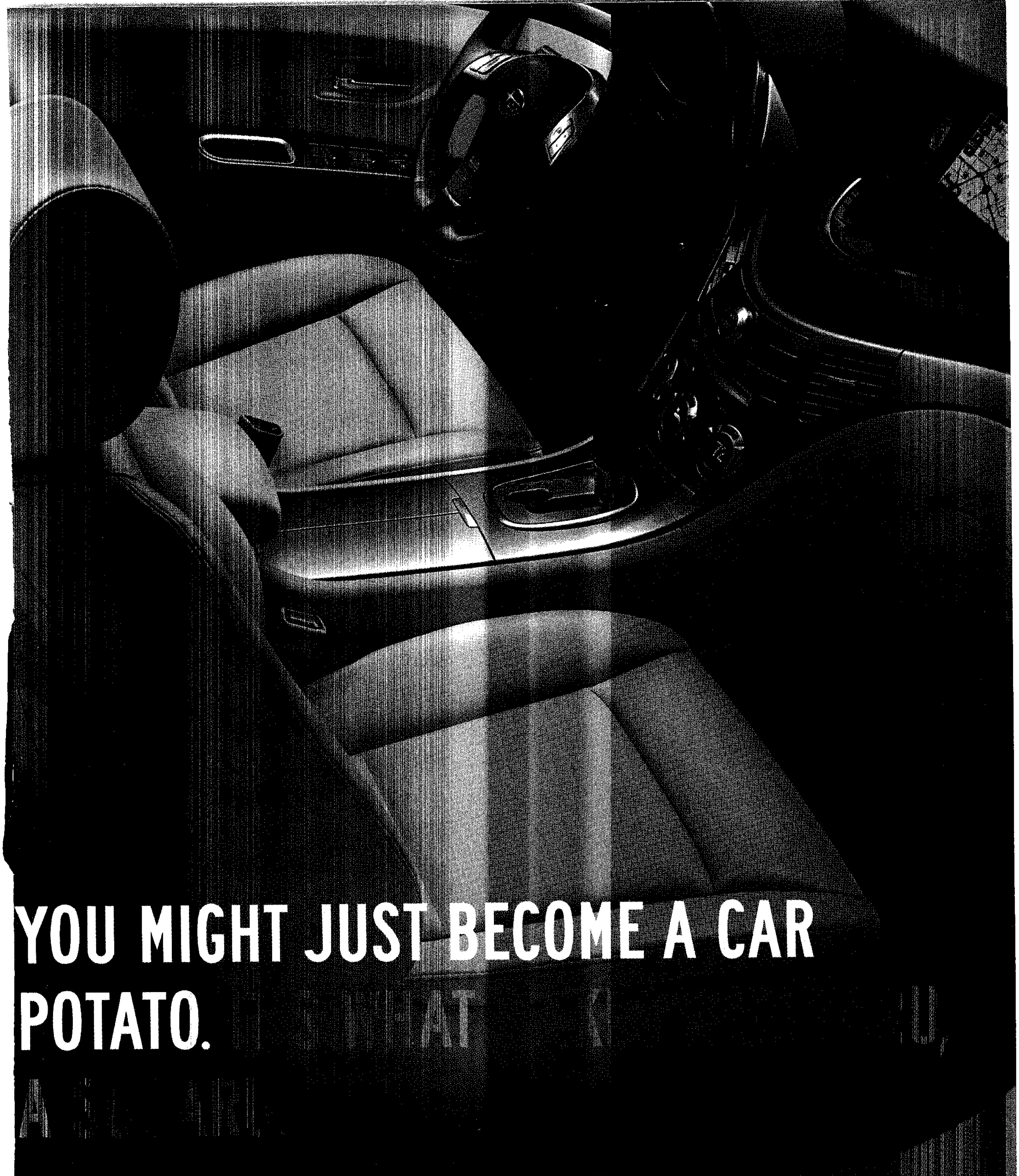

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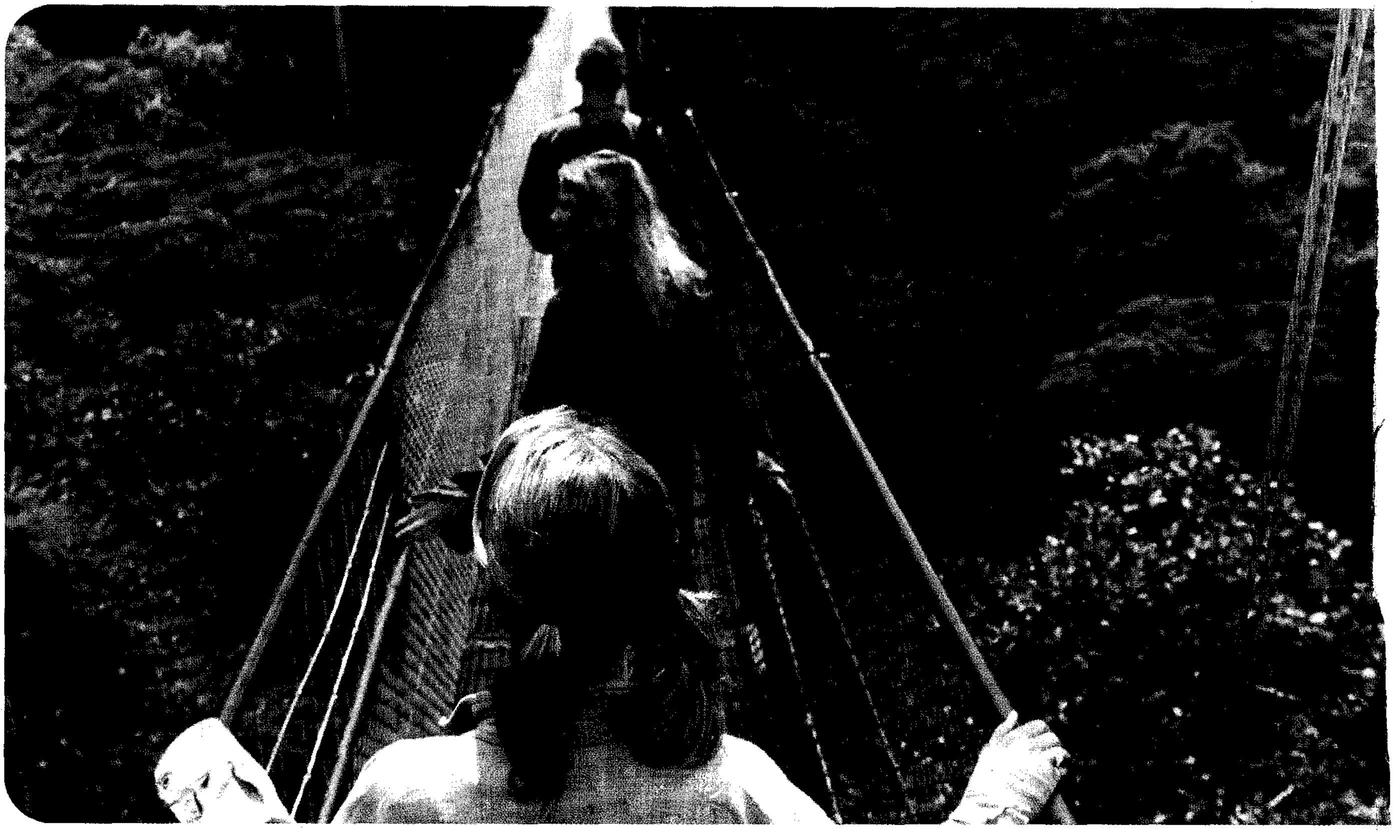

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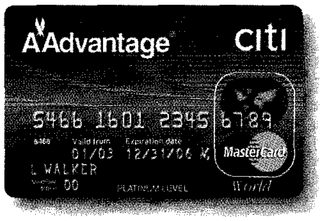

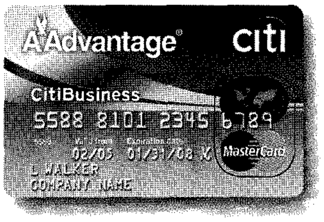

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